

Darkest time

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Darkest time

by [Liebing23](#)

Summary

Lan Wangji dies and the cultivation world is left to live with the aftermath.

You can find the Spanish translation by AshyEiji [here](#).

Notes

Mind the tags, this will be painful.

Mods, please de anon! Thank you.

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Gusu Lan

"B-Brother, please protect A-Yuan and... forgive me."

Rules are meant to be followed.

Years of experience are supposedly behind every rule, ensuring each one will be solving or preventing a specific situation. Rules are meant to be followed because that will assure a cultivator walks down the right path and keeps them away from evil practices.

Rules said Wangji had to be punished because siding with evil and going against the rules of his elders was wrong, rules said his brother was going to learn from his mistakes and return to the *righteous* path so his reputation and life wasn't ruined. Things were supposed to be right, they were supposed to leave all of this behind.

So why is Wangji bleeding out in his arms?

"It's okay, Wangji, he will be fine, the healers will check on him," Lan Xichen whispers, trying to ignore the warmth spreading on his arms supporting his brother's back after he almost fell to the floor. "And there's nothing to apologise for, so stay calm, okay?"

Lan Wangji shakes his head and Xichen knows why he's doing it, but his brain refuses to accept it, refuses to accept his little brother is truly dying in his arms. "B-Brother..."

"It's okay," he smiles, using his own sleeves to wipe the sweat from his face, redoubling his efforts in channelling his spiritual energy into the trembling body. "They will be here in a second."

"I apologise for making you suffer," Wangji whispers, voice weak and devoid of the strength he's so used to hearing on him, his golden eyes not burning with the passion so characteristic of him. "I apologise for bringing so many problems to you and... I'm sorry for leaving you."

"You're not leaving me, please," his voice breaks at the end of the sentence. "And you're not causing any problems, you're my brother, Wangji and I regret not helping you sooner but I—I won't fail you again, I promise."

"You have never failed me," His shaky, cold and pale hand holds the one channelling the energy into him, stopping him. "Thank you, brother."

Lan Xichen was taught to not show emotions excessively, to remain calm and composed in spite of any situation. Emotions were dangerous and could be used against the individual in question... but rules also told him punishment was the right thing to do and when Lan Wangji takes his last shuddering breath.

The rules can go to hell.

He cries, screams and begs for his brother to hold on and wait for the healers that decide to take that exact same moment to appear after being called, but he gets no reaction or response. No matter how much he shakes and tries to make his brother react, nothing happens and nothing will happen ever again.

Lan Wangji, his brother, is dead and his own sect is responsible for it.

The Cloud Recesses are a mess when Lan Qiren steps out of the room he has been meditating on.

Disciples are walking hurriedly through the corridors, talking in an equally hurried tone that goes against the rules and calmness their residency is supposed to have. Lan Qiren is close to start questioning everyone about what happened so they act like this when he hears it.

The distinctive sound of desperate crying and screams of pure pain reach his ears and even when he tries to deny it, he realises he recognises the voice. It freezes him as if the blood running through his body has turned into ice. He is incapable of moving the more the voice rings in his ears, the ugly and painful sensation growing inside him until it finally snaps and allows him to move.

His hurried steps carry him through the same corridors those disciples are using, his arms even push some of them out of the way, the pressure inside his chest making him feel he's about to suffer a qi deviation.

As he had assumed, it is Lan Xichen the one screaming and crying so desperately and the reason why is enough to make Lan Qiren think about doing it, too. "Xichen— Xichen what happened?"

His eldest nephew doesn't reply, of course, he can't do it. His sobs are painful and the way he hugs the limp body while asking him to wake up is enough to make everyone who has gathered there look away in pain and respect. His robes are stained with blood, red ruining the pure light-blue the leader always wore so diligently... Lan Qiren doesn't even want to talk about the state of Lan Wangji's robes.

"W-What happened?" he finally manages to ask a disciple who is standing there without moving a single muscle, his voice making him jump.

"H-Hanguang-Jun left, we were looking for him and then he just— he returned carrying a sick child," the young one replies with a shaky voice, keeping his eyes on the floor. "He asked the sect leader to protect him and then he... Zewu-Jun barely managed to hold him."

A sick child, Wangji leaving; nothing makes sense and the desperate cries of Xichen in the background aren't making it any easier. Wangji was supposed to be in seclusion, recovering after the punishment he had to go through, recovering from his *severe* injuries, there wasn't anything out there important enough to make him leave, so why? And who was this mysterious child?

The pressure in his chest is now stronger, infecting every single part of his body with that dreadful and unwelcomed despair, but he has to do something. For years it was he who had to take charge of the sect, who had to deal with everything while his brother was too stricken by sadness and guilt to take proper care of it.

This isn't different, right?

Turning back to his nephews, he sees two healers standing there, eyes filled with doubt as if the one in front of them is someone they don't know and are scared he will react badly. Lan Qiren has the fleeting thought that they have tried to tell Xichen something only to have him snapping at them.

"Xichen," he tries, kneeling in front of him, trying to not stare at the lifeless body in the arms of the other. "Xichen let go of him."

"No!" Xichen's scream is loud, the loudest his voice has sounded ever since he was a kid, bloodshot eyes staring at him with pain and... hatred. "Haven't you done enough?!"

He's a respectable man, one who is often labelled as unbreakable and unmovable in his resolutions, someone with no feelings according to some, and someone who doesn't really get affected by anything... but when he hears that, something inside him breaks in a way he's sure he will never be capable of repairing.

Sounds of leather hitting and breaking skin fill his ears, small and quiet gasps of pain turning into whimpers and even cries fill his heart, the picture of his two nephews is replaced by a kneeling Lan Wangji barely managing to hold himself up as his own uncle recites the rules and one of the elders bring the whip down again, Lan Xichen is there too, begging them, *him*, to stop.

He's right, isn't he?

On this day, Lan Qiren runs.

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A funeral is held in the next few days with all the preparations and formalities one would expect from the Gusu Lan Sect, but Xichen is barely conscious of what is happening around him.

He's not aware at what moment they managed to take Wangji's body from his arms, he just knows that night he walked to his Hanshi with his arms soaked in blood and tears still rolling down his cheeks, he only knows he cried the whole night and that it was a male disciple the one who had to help him the next day to change and function as a normal human being.

His robes are white, but they're plain and don't have that comforting *something* his Gusu Lan robes have yet, they remind him of Wangji. His brother who carried this ethereal look and perfection with every movement, who wore his white robes so perfectly it made the rest of disciples and even himself fall to the bottom of any list.

His Wangji, his little A-Zhan, his little brother.

The one he has to bury.

The main hall doesn't have a lot of people when he steps inside; the vast majority of disciples and elders are mourning the loss of this powerful cultivator privately after paying their respects and Xichen finds himself despising every single thing, they all left Wangji alone before and they are doing it again.

Wangji's body has been cleaned, the bloodied robes are gone, the beads of sweat cleaned and the nightmare of wounds on his back concealed from view. He's now wearing elegant white robes Xichen remembers seeing him using so many times before, the delicate and protective incantations sewn into the fabric reminding Xichen once more that it wasn't evilness who murdered his brother, but his own sect.

"I'm sorry, Wangji," he whispers as he leans over the pale body, trying to replace the image of his brother shivering and in clear pain as he dies with this one where he only looks as if he's sleeping. "I'm so sorry."

Begging for forgiveness is useless, no matter how much he cries and begs, Wangji will remain dead and his mistakes won't be forgiven, ever. He will have to carry with him for the rest of his life the death of his younger brother because Lan Wangji was younger, with a promising life ahead for him, free of the burdens being a sect leader meant and free to build his own story; he deserved to live and do great things, greater things. He didn't deserve to die before him and half of the elders who condemned him to that sadistic punishment.

If it wasn't for Wei Wuxian, if it wasn't for that *kid*.

A sudden and violent jerk makes him move back and stare in horror at his brother. How dare he blame someone that isn't himself? The young kid is still fighting the aftermath of the fever, his small body is struggling to survive the toll the sickness took on his body. They are all honestly surprised he is alive and even more that he has a small chance of recovering without lasting damage, so how can Xichen even think about blaming him? He's *just a child*.

Wei Wuxian follows a similar train of thought. The young man is dead, gone after falling from a cliff despite Wangji's efforts to save him. He had left the world while still being very young and his last months on this world had been horrible, to say the least... Lan Xichen doesn't even want to think about it because he's sure he will have even more things to regret.

Ultimately, it is the same, he was dead, the kid was sick and it wasn't their fault.

"I'm sorry," he whispers as the shame burns stronger. "I-I, it won't happen again."

He still doesn't know how it will be possible for him to continue, can't even tell if it will be possible, but he feels it's the very least he can do for his little brother after failing to protect him.

"I promise he will be safe and... I promise things will be different," he whispers, resting his hand on his brother's, ignoring the coldness that seems to go deep into his bones. "Please rest

Wangji.”

It isn't easy to go on with the funeral, it isn't easy to bury his brother and then realise that was the last time he saw him, that he won't come back ever again because he's dead, he really is dead and no matter what he does it won't change. He hates the elders, hates the fact that his uncle isn't there and hates that people give him a look that seems to scream in his face how much they pity him.

They are all as guilty as he is. They agreed on punishing Wangji when he came back from Yiling and went on with the punishment when they found out he had kept the forces of the other sects from entering that palace in the Burial Mounds. No one stopped, not even when Wangji spat blood and had to use his hands to keep himself from falling all the way to the floor.

They all let him die, they're all guilty.

For someone who has repressed his feelings for more than twenty years, he can now feel everything violently moving inside of him. He can taste the venom in his tongue and the bitter and horrible sense of grief coursing through his veins. The nights become a blur filled with nightmares and pain, the memory of his brother giving his last breath in his arms makes him wake up panting and crying and forces him to stumble through the Cloud Recesses to reach the Jingshi where reality once more hits him in the face because it is dark, empty and cold.

“The kid—”

“A-Yuan,” Xichen interrupts the elder. “His name is A-Yuan.”

“A-Yuan,” he corrects, “has recovered from the infection, he will go back to being a healthy little kid.”

The people in there seem to collectively sigh in relief, glances are exchanged and faint words of *I'm glad* fill Xichen's ears and has to admit he's glad. It didn't take him long to understand where the kid came from and where Wangji had been before— they accepted him saves him from going mad at them.

“He will be taken as a disciple,” another one says, receiving slow nods from the rest.

“Not only a disciple,” Lan Qiren says. “Wangji brought him back and gave his life to keep him safe... he is basically his son.”

The silence that follows is heavy as the old men ponder if they can go that far, if they can bend the rules to that degree. Xichen feels the hatred stabbing him in the chest once more, though, this time is capable of putting his uncle aside because he is who suggested it.

“Our rules killed Wangji,” he says bluntly, holding his ground when they all gasp and look scandalised. “I do not wish to see a little kid suffer because of them, too.”

It's the first time that he brings this up, despite wanting to scream it on their faces every time it was mentioned how *unfortunate* it had been to lose their second young master, it is the first time he brings it up and that is fine. Wangji's death wasn't an unfortunate accident, it was something deliberate and if Xichen has dealt with his guilt, then they should do it as well.

"Sect Leader, I think that's too severe," the one to his right says. "Lan Wangji's death was caused by a series of unfortunate events."

"That is not true," he whispers, digging his fingers on his palms. "Wangji... loved Wei Wuxian and his death hurt him deeply, he wanted to preserve the memory of him, was that wrong?"

He asks, they look uncomfortable at the mention of Wei Wuxian and even more at the idea of having who was their brightest disciple connected to him. "I understand, but actions have consequences."

"If someone came here to burn the jingshi would we let it happen just because it is the right thing?" he asks, his tone more demanding and taking that tint of a sect leader. "Our rules said Wangji deserved to be punished but did the rules also say he had to die?"

"Of course not!"

"He was a righteous cultivator to the very end, saving a sick child, staying true to his values and even apologising for causing problems," he says, the emotions tight in his chest. "That should have given him a long and happy life according to the rules, but he's gone. It is clear things need to change."

Lan Xichen doesn't care if it isn't easy, doesn't care if it takes him ages to do it, but he will use this pain to make things change.

Lan Qiren is not the same person. He can't quite point out exactly what it is because he can't find the right words that fit what he is experiencing.

It isn't the kind of a disappointment that filled him when he realised Wei Wuxian was bound to be another guest disciple he couldn't shove into the right path just like his mother, it is not the kind of disappointment he felt when Wangji, of all people, seemed to fall in love with him and it's not just grief because he feels it goes beyond that.

He is no stranger to death, none of them are. His sister-in-law died when her children were still too young, his brother died after years of consuming his everything in seclusion and a lot of people died right in front of him as the Sunshot Campaign progressed and while it is obvious they all affected him in one way or another, Wangji's death is consuming him.

He remembers the little baby with pale skin and shining gold eyes looking silently at him after he had stopped crying, remembers a little toddler struggling to copy what his brother did and remembers the pride that filled him when Wangji grew up to be the man he always

wished he would be, but what he remembers more is his pale and livid face with bloodied lips that demanded to know what was right and what was wrong.

How could he do that?

Despite what others might think, he loves his nephews and every single thing he did was done because he was sure they were the right thing to do. Their rules have raised countless generations and it was thanks to them that their sect became one of the four big ones, who could blame him for thinking he was saving him? Who can push the blame to him?

He doesn't need anyone to do it, he already does.

The punishment was too much, no matter how strong a cultivator is they are still humans and he should have known it was too much for his nephew despite his level of cultivation, he should have been capable of seeing that no transgression was worth his life... What's the point of thinking about it, though? What's done is done, nothing will bring Wangji back, nothing will help Xichen with the pain that is tearing him apart.

He was right in blaming him for it.

Lan Qiren took both to keep them safe, to guide them so they didn't commit the same *mistakes* their father did and to spare them from getting a life similar to the one their mother had. He promised his brother and himself that they were going to have a good life, that they were always going to be in the righteous path, so how can one be dead? What would his brother say? Nothing good, he can tell, but he deserves all of it.

"The punishment was too severe," he says, cutting whatever an elder had been saying until then. "Wangji never did anything that made him deserve death."

"He survived his punishment," one says as if that made it so much better. "He sadly got an infection that consumed him for going out."

"To save a dying child and protect what was left of the man he loved," Xichen says, the hatred burning stronger on those eyes that used to be so kind and gentle. "If he wasn't hit three hundred times he wouldn't have succumbed to that infection."

In other circumstances he would be scandalised to hear his nephew talking to the elders like that, he would immediately scold him for being so blatantly disrespectful, but in his current state he can't. He agrees with Xichen, agrees that it is their fault Wangji was so weak he couldn't fight off an infection, for the first time he's doubting the rules he defended so much and if the death of his nephew is bringing his world down, this doubt is destroying the small pieces left behind.

"This can't happen again," he says, his voice sounding too quiet. "Something needs to be done."

There are people who agree and people who disagree, the room fills with voices that can barely keep themselves from rising in volume but Lan Qiren can't hear any of them. These

days haven't been easy but being reminded of Wangji's death like this has made everything completely unbearable.

Quietly, he stands up and waits until the voices have quieted down and everyone is looking at him before speaking, "I will be going into seclusion."

This time the voices do reach a new level, panicked questions and words are thrown at him but he can't reply, not now, so he just excuses himself and heads for the door. Xichen is looking at him when he throws back one last glance, but Lan Qiren notices his nephew is not looking at him with the same hatred he has been throwing at him ever since that day where Wangji— instead he finds pain, guilt and the smallest spark of disappointment that burns stronger, but he understands why.

He failed Wangji and now he's failing him, too, but for the first time in years, Lan Qiren is incapable of doing something about it.

Qinghe Nie

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The news of Lan Wangji's death reach Nie Mingjue one night he's catching up with the paperwork that accumulated while he was away dealing with a beast terrorizing a nearby village.

Things have been chaotic ever since Wei Wuxian died and Jin Guangshan declared he would be *keeping safe* the piece of the Tiger Tally the now-deceased man threw into the battlefield before letting himself fall off a cliff. Nie Mingjue's desk was always filled with letters from different sects and normal people, but that night, a blue one caught his attention.

He knew Xichen was dealing with internal things his sect wasn't revealing to the public and knew the death of Wei Wuxian wasn't necessarily a good thing for someone in specific, and because of this, the letters he received from him were scarce. Given how much he appreciated the man despite his insistence on trusting Jin Guangyao, he was quick to prioritise that one over the others, wanting to read something lighthearted and kind that took his head off the stress. Xichen was always kind and wished him well while hoping Huaisang wasn't giving him many problems.

Instead, he finds something that seems to stop the world entirely.

Wangji is dead.

There's no greeting, no good wishes, there's only one sentence written almost messily, with one trace slightly smudged because the hand who wrote it was trembling or tried to clean something while the ink was still fresh. It's unnatural, something someone so elegant and refined like Lan Xichen would never do, so Nie Mingjue initially clings to that and tries to reason this is a horrible thing made by someone with a hidden motive but... what would they gain?

It would make more sense if they wrote saying the leader is dead, easier to fake an emergency just to lure him into a trap and as if that wasn't enough, the piece of parchment is genuine, the one Xichen uses for all his letters with an equally real stamp. With all of this, it sounds ridiculous to deny it any longer, but Nie Mingjue can't wrap his head around it because... because Lan Wangji is—was— younger, more capable than many old cultivators and he *can't be dead*.

“Da-ge! I have told you to leave the paperwork for tomorrow, you're tired and resting is important. I don't know how many times—”

Huaisang's voice stops abruptly and it takes the older man a while to understand he stopped because his expression is probably worse than he imagined. When he lifts his eyes he finds his younger brother staring at him with a worried expression standing a couple of steps away from his desk. “Huaisang...”

“Da-ge, what’s wrong?” he asks before shaking his head. “I will get the physicians.”

Nie Mingjue is not surprised to hear his brother immediately thinks this is one of his many attacks where his body is once more closer to suffering a qi deviation, but he still manages to stop him before he runs out of the room. “No, it’s not that.”

His confusion increases but still steps closer to reach his desk. “What is it?”

And he wants to say it, to explain what has him like this, but when he opens his mouth he finds the words stuck inside his throat. The natural moisture has been absorbed and he is sure nothing will come out no matter how many times he tries, so, defeated, he extends the letter to the other who eyes him with the same concern before looking at the letter. His reaction is immediate.

“Lan-er-gongzi?” he asks breathlessly. “That can’t be.”

Mingjue is glad he’s not the only one who jumped to that idea, but it is painful to see his little brother eventually reaching the same conclusion he reached. “I don’t understand either.”

Huaisang goes back to reading again the single line written on the letter and it isn’t long before his eyes fill with tears and it hurts to see it but Mingjue can’t do anything about it. Huaisang knows the people and the Gusu Lan Sect as well as he knows his own sect and Lan Wangji is, was, always a constant. Even when his little brother was always intimidated by his presence and preferred to run away whenever he was left alone with him, he knew Lan Wangji, saw him grow up as he also grew.

How can he be dead?

“B-But what happened?” he hopelessly asks, looking at him despite knowing Mingjue doesn’t have the answer.

“I’ll leave for Gusu tomorrow,” he replies instead. “I don’t know how Xichen will be, so wait here, please.”

He wants to debate, wants to go and Mingjue feels horrible for denying him, but the letter on its own says a lot about Xichen’s mental state and he doesn’t want him to feel even worse for having more people there.

“A-Alright... please give him my condolences.”

Nie Mingjue still hopes for this to be a trap or something similar as he flies to Gusu. It sounds ridiculous and unbelievably stupid to put himself in a dangerous situation, but he still hopes for it because that is ten times better than having Lan Wangji really dead.

Reality hits him in the face.

As soon as he arrives at the entrance to the Cloud Recesses and the disciples guarding it allow him inside saying they were expecting him, he can tell something is definitely off. The

atmosphere feels sombre, suffocating in a way that it is different from the time when Wen Xu came to burn their buildings and murder their disciples, it reminds Mingjue of the same suffocating sensation that wrapped around him when his father died on that fateful night hunt.

His heart is in his throat by the time he reaches the hanshi and it takes him too long to raise his hand and knock. It's ridiculous because he has known Xichen for years and is more than used to visiting him, but the heaviness and pain that leaves this place presses down against him.

"Da-ge..." Xichen's voice is barely above a whisper and the sigh of him has Mingjue's stomach dropping. "You came."

"I came as soon as I saw the letter," he says, feeling bad for taking so long. "I was on a night hunt, I'm sorry I didn't come sooner."

"It was a private ceremony," Lan Xichen whispers, moving away from the door to let him enter. "Having a lot of people, of strangers... Wangji would have hated it."

Lan Xichen's eyes are red, swollen after he probably spent days crying in the loneliness of his room. He is still wearing plain white robes, his long hair held in a simple tie with the intricate headpiece nowhere to be seen. When Mingjue steps inside he can see the forehead ribbon tossed carelessly on the bed and the room that normally has everything in its place a mess. What's worse, though, is the fact that Lan Xichen doesn't even seem to care.

"Xichen, I..." he starts but stops almost immediately.

He knows he needs to say something, knows he's here to comfort the man, to give him the condolences, to *do something*, but he can't. Nothing feels appropriate and he feels like the biggest idiot. This is something he never imagined he would ever hear, someone like Lan Wangji shouldn't be dead and nothing sounds appropriate.

"We failed him, that's what happened," his sworn brother surprises him by talking. "There is no other explanation."

Nie Mingjue wishes that was enough, wishes he could understand what he means with that so he can spare him from going into much detail, but it doesn't make sense. They are people of strict rules, people who have no interest in changing what made their sect thrive, so how could this be the reason why their second young master is dead?

"What happened?" he finally dares to ask, looking at the other while he looks out of the window. "Losing someone we love so much makes us feel guilty, but I'm sure it wasn't like that."

"But it was," he whispers, his hand resting against the wall. "Wangji was punished for not letting others ransack the palace at the Burial Mounds, for disrespecting our ancestors by questioning the rules. He was so hurt, so weak, but even with that he went to the Burial Mounds and came back with a feverish and unconscious child... he asked me to protect him and to forgive him before dying in my arms."

Nie Mingjue feels as if he has been struck by lightning. His father also died in his arms after weeks of battling the damage done by that beast and the pain is something he still feels to this day. "Xichen, I'm sorry."

He can't find better words, he doubts there are better ones in fact, but it still feels like nothing, so when Xichen once more breaks down in tears he can't keep himself from hugging the man and letting his own tears fill his eyes. Unlike Wangji who *was* a more reserved person who disliked physical contact, Xichen was more open and even when Mingjue was never the kind of person who did any of this, he holds him, offering the kind of comfort he can't be sure of his sect can provide.

"This shouldn't have happened," the other leader cries, "I failed him, it was my fault and I shouldn't have pushed all the blame to Uncle."

Mingjue internally winces, he knows how it is to be in that erratic state of mind where one lash out at everyone no matter how much he cares about them. When his father died he snapped at Huaisang and his people even more despite not being responsible for anything. It is a dangerous spiral filled with darkness that feeds off the anger and pain the person experiences. "You didn't mean it, you're going through something.... Horrible and he will understand."

"He went into seclusion," he says, of course, it gets worse. "He looked so heartbroken and I made it worse, he raised us, it is obvious it hurt him."

"You need time, he needs it as well," he says, struggling to find the best words. "Wangji trusted you for a reason."

He's not that happy to say this, it feels manipulative, but he's using it with his best intention. He knew Lan Wangji and knew the love and faith he had in the people he loved; if he brought that mysterious kid back to them and asked his brother to protect him, then that means he still trusted him despite the mistakes Xichen is convinced they made.

"He was better than many," he whispers, pulling back when he seems to realise what he's doing and he's ashamed of leaning into him. "I'm sorry I... I'm trying, I can promise you I'm trying. We're working on changing things, they killed Wangji, they can't remain the same, I'm tending to A-Yuan and many more things but there are times where I don't feel strong enough."

"You don't have to prove anything to anyone," he says, for now holding back the urge of asking about this A-Yuan. "You need to grieve, to assimilate what happened and find the best way to continue."

"There are days where I don't want to continue," he says, voice dull, moving towards the bed to reach for his forehead ribbon. "It had always been the two of us, the two jades, so similar we could even pass as twins... I feel incomplete, so lonely."

The Two Jades were indeed well known as a unique duo who could destroy their enemies with relative ease and their relationship in a more private setting was as unique. Xichen understood Wangji even when the man's face didn't change, he could tell if something

pleased, annoyed or worried him just by glancing at him and Wangji, in return, was especially perceptive of his brother's well-being and needs. Despite understanding the pain of losing a family member, Mingjue can tell he can't fully understand what he is experiencing. Xichen was the older brother, the one who followed this unwritten rule that says the older sibling has to take care and protect the younger and this sense of failure only makes his guilt burn stronger.

"But you're doing it, you're more than capable," he reminds him, squeezing his arm. "If you need anything, just let me know."

Xichen nods, face slightly red as he's struggling to keep himself from bursting out in tears again. "A-Yuan reminds me a bit of him," he whispers, "he has expressive eyes and he's cute, just like Wangji when he was his age."

Mingjue nods with a small smile but ultimately is incapable of holding back the question that had been burning his insides ever since he heard about him. "Where did he find him?"

And Xichen hesitates, doubt fills his eyes as he looks back down at the forehead ribbon. It stings to see it and makes him feel a small spark of pain in his chest because the two of them have known each other for years and he thought there was nothing to hide, but then he understands.

"He... lived in the Burial Mounds before Wei Wuxian and everyone else died," he finally says.

"There was a child?"

"Yes, there was a child," he says, looking up at him with now pleading eyes. "He has been taken into our sect as Wangji's son, he gave his life for him and he's *just a kid*. I understand I'm asking too much, but Mingjue, please."

Then Qinghe Nie leader immediately feels stupid for doubting the other because he can clearly feel the severity of the issue growing inside of him. He's just a kid, yes, but he's a Wen and that anger that has probably aggravated the influence of his sabre burns at the sole mention of the clan, the previously comforting thought of every single Wen being dead shatters and demands him to do something so it changes.

But he's not a monster, he doesn't want to be a monster like them.

"I won't reveal anything," he says, crushing down that thirst for blood. "He's Wangji's son and I will help, if needed, to keep him safe."

The relief that fills his sworn brother helps to soothe the remnants of anger that took over his body. Xichen still looks hurt and broken, but to know he won't have to worry about someone wanting to kill the little kid just because of his background seems to make wonders.

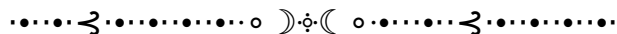
"He's still weak after the fever that almost takes his life," he says, "he can't stay awake for too long, but I think he has a lot of potential. With proper training, he will be a great cultivator."

“With a great uncle guiding him, I’m sure he will.”

Xichen smiles, but the emotion doesn’t reach his eyes. The pain comes back like a wave that fills his eyes with fresh tears and forces him to frantically rub them to wipe them away and cross his arms to look a bit better. “Thank you for coming, da-ge, and for understanding.”

“I know you would do the same,” he says but can’t keep the shiver from running down his spine at thinking about Huaisang and premature death. “You can always count on me.”

“Thank you... but I hope no one has to go through this.”



“Wei-xiong was crazy for always teasing him, I remember his sole presence scared me!” Huaisang says with an entertained smile. “He was in charge of the punishments and he looked so cool doing it.”

Ni Mingjue can only look at his brother as he speaks animatedly, shaking his cup of liquor around with every exaggerated movement. “Wangji was always proper.”

“You have no idea, da-ge!” he exclaims, the rosy tone on his cheeks more noticeable while his eyes stay on the bottle. “He couldn’t drink though, one cup and he was drunk.”

The leader can’t hold back a small smile at that, Xichen is the same, probably everyone who comes from the direct bloodline is. “How would you know?”

“Wei Wuxian of course,” he replies with a grin that vanishes almost instantly. “We had so much fun while studying and then, everything changed... now both are dead and I...”

He doesn’t finish the sentence, the tears spill down his face once more and Mingjue can only reach to hold his hand in an attempt to comfort him. His brother has been as heartbroken as him when he came back from Gusu and confirmed the news, he has cried in his arms and has been getting drunk to speak about his memories without thinking of what his older brother will say or do once he finds out about things he didn’t know.

“I’m going to miss him,” he snuffles. “The Cloud Recesses won’t be the same without him.”

“Nothing will be,” he adds, pushing away his own cup. “Everything has already changed.”

Not only Gusu is upside down and suffering in the aftermath of losing their second young master, but Nie Mingjue is also feeling conflicted and thinks about something he never stopped to think about before.

Wei Wuxian, the Wen remnants, it felt right to put an end to all the conflicts that started because of them, for him felt right to end with the clan who were responsible of his father’s death and many more crimes they committed and while he couldn’t lie and say he didn’t feel anything when Wei Wuxian fell off that cliff, he didn’t think it would go this far. Lan Wangji indeed looked heartbroken, destroyed by the death of the man who Mingjue thought was only

an acquaintance for him, but from there to have him going against the rules he always respected and followed was a huge difference.

Lan Wangji didn't deserve to die and this thought makes him wonder if Wei Wuxian and... others didn't either.

Nie Mingjue allowed things to happen because he hated, hates, the Wen, but everything else is kind of blurry. Jin Guangshan played a huge role in everything and having him now *guarding* the piece of metal Wei Wuxian created now raises his suspicions more... Ultimately, he can't do anything but sigh and hope things will get better without having to lose more people.

“Da-ge... do you think they are now together?” Huaisang asks, eyes half-closed. “Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, I mean.”

“I don't know, but I hope they are.”

Chapter End Notes

...This is painful.

Thank you so much for reading, for your kudos and everything else, hope I can read you all here for this chapter as well.

Lanling Jin

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I heard Sect Leader Lan is coming for the next conference. It will be interesting.”

Jin Guangyao tightens the hold he has on the brush but doesn't raise his head to look at his father, knowing he will get more information if he continues with what he's doing instead of showing clearly he's listening to their conversation.

“Took him too long,” Sect Leader Yao comments. “I understand the death of Lan Wangji was tragic, but he's the leader, he should be strong.”

“The tragic part is questionable,” Sect Leader Ouyang says with a snort. “He sided with Wei Ying till the very end, actions have consequences.”

The hurtful words, the entitlement and the complete lack of empathy don't surprise Jin Guangyao at all. Time and time again all of them have shown their true colours, the intentions that hide behind fake smiles and concerns. They are like this now and they were like that when the news of Lan Wangji's death arrived.

Jin Guangyao still has a hard time wrapping his head around it.

The man had to be punished, he knew. Like many, he saw Lan Wangji had been the only one who tried to help Wei Wuxian after he let himself fall from that cliff and the only one who defended him all the time, Jin Guangyao was there when Su She almost lashed out at the man for keeping them from entering the palace and he had to admit he was pleased to have the man's uncle waiting to take him back to the Cloud Recesses because it gave him fewer problems. Lan Wangji deliberately broke many rules, went against what was *good* and everything, but still...

He never thought death would be that punishment.

“Ah, let's not be too harsh on him,” Jin Guangshan says. “Losing a family member isn't easy and one is never ready to face it.”

“Oh, but your situation was completely different!”

“Your son and nephew were murdered! It will never be the same!”

No, it really isn't different and Jin Guangyao knows it.

The Lanling Jin Sect found out about the death of Lan Wangji through a letter. Jin Guangyao remembers they were in the middle of a meeting with the elders to discuss the plan for that year when one messenger came in carrying a letter marked as urgent that came from Gusu. Despite *everything*, one of Jin Guangyao's main concerns was and still is Lan Xichen, so to

receive something that could say there's something wrong with him almost made him snatch the letter from his father's hand to read it himself.

"Lan Wangji is dead," he had said, surprised. *"Lan Xichen is apologising because he won't be coming to the reunions for a while, he will be sending someone to represent them."*

The elders had been equally surprised, talking hurriedly and asking the leader for more details, for something that made that whole situation more understandable, but of course, there were no details. Jin Guangyao read the letter once everyone had left and the piece of paper was left behind on the table and he found out that Lan Xichen didn't give an explanation of what happened. He was merely informing that due to the death of his brother he wasn't going to be attending any meetings for a while, he apologised and introduced the one prepared to fill in his spot and as if all of that wasn't surprising enough, Jin Guangyao saw it wasn't Lan Qiren or anyone he knew that much... it just made it more confusing.

His first reaction was going to visit his sworn brother because even when he is helping his father to plot horrible things that will finally make him worth something in his eyes, he cares for Lan Xichen. The man holds a special place in this cruel world and he couldn't even imagine how much he was suffering, but he ultimately went against it because of the many things that needed to be done and because he wanted to know if something in his father's plan changed or shifted to fit better.

"Well, my only hope is that he's stable enough to deal with everything," Sect Leader Yao speaks again. "We were left with so much work after what happened, he needs to meet up the expectations."

"I'm sure he will," his father says. "He's the only heir to the Gusu Lan Sect after all."

On the day of the conference, Jin Guangyao finds himself having a hard time in welcoming everyone or engaging in small talk. Whenever he sees someone who isn't Lan Xichen going inside the main hall he has to resist the urge to sigh and look disappointed as he plasters a smile on his face and thanks them for coming. The Lan Xichen who replies to his letters doesn't *feel* like the same he used to know and he fears the man has forced himself to move forward just because he thinks he has to do it. The least he wants is to have these people making fun of him or even shaming him for his feelings.

The Lan Xichen who arrives is, indeed, not the same Jin Guangyao knew.

He is not in his bones, doesn't look pale, malnourished and on the brink of losing his mind as Jin Guangyao thought he would be, he still is this tall man with a broad and elegant complexion, but there's *something* that says he's not the same.

His amber eyes that used to be so gentle are slightly colder, not like Lan Wangji's were, but colder, the soft and kind smile is now just his lips barely curving upwards when someone approaches to greet him and that vanishes as soon as he's alone.

“Er-ge,” he says as soon as he reaches him. “I hope you had a safe trip, I’m glad we can finally meet.”

He knows this falls entirely on him, he is the one who didn’t go to check on his sworn brother as soon as he found out what happened but prefers to handle it like this. Lan Xichen’s eyes light up slightly when he sees him and Jin Guangyao allows himself to sigh in relief, he feared he would hate everyone now.

“A-Yao, yes, it’s been a while,” he says with a small nod. “I understand you’re busy, the world doesn’t stop no matter what.”

The words are simple, but he can tell there are many things hiding inside of them and that on its own says a lot about the man’s condition. There’s even a small and almost unnoticeable spark of resentment on those eyes that used to be so bright and that’s yet another indicator.

“You are right, but I kept you in my mind all the time,” he says, guiding him to his spot. “Er-ge, if you need something, anything, please let me know, no matter what I’m doing.”

Lan Xichen smiles at him and it’s almost, almost, the smile Jin Guangyao saw the first time they met, but it’s gone right after he blinks. “Thank you, A-Yao, but please do not worry. I will take care of things.”

Jin Guangyao’s mind scrambles to understand the million things those words carry, tries to understand a bit more of just how many things have changed about the sworn brother he knew so well, but he realises he can’t, at least not for now. With a smile, he waits until he and the rest get to their place before finally moving away.

The appearance of the Gusu Lan leader doesn’t go unnoticed. People throw subtle and not so subtle glances at him, with many preferring to talk with each other while others move to greet him and offer their condolences before asking for a more proper explanation of what happened.

“My brother died because of mistakes committed by many,” he replies every time, confusing the people he’s talking to because they probably expect the man to accept his brother was wrong and caused his own death.

“But Sect Leader, Hanguang-jun sided with the Yiling Patriarch!” some argue, shrinking back when Lan Xichen’s colder eyes fall on them. “I’m not saying he deserved it, I could never! But things...”

“Things aren’t black or white.”

He always ends like that and no matter how much the others insist or try to argue for their cause, Lan Xichen drops the topic entirely and goes on to question things that eventually force them to leave with a polite smile.

They can’t understand it and Jin Guangyao can’t either.

The Lan Xichen he knows would still be private about these sensitive matters and wouldn't disclose every single detail about the incident, but he would say something that appeases everyone despite not being the best thing. The man and the sect as a whole have always been the kind that prefers to have a good relationship with every sect, so to have him leaving things vague while also declaring his brother's death didn't fall on him is unnatural.

"Lastly, we have the petitions done by different villages to help with monsters and ghosts," one of the leaders says with a small shrug. "Of course, I won't be wasting everyone's time with them."

"I would actually want my disciples to participate," Lan Xichen's voice seems to freeze everyone in the room.

"But Sect Leader, we wouldn't want to waste your people's time with such banal requests!" the same man says after recovering from the shock. "Weak ghosts and mindless monsters aren't a real threat."

"I am aware, but practising is the best way to assure our cultivators are strong," the leader continues, completely unaffected by the reactions. "Our juniors could learn a lot from them."

"But Sect Leader..."

"Sect Leader Lan is right," Jin Guangshan cuts in. "Although surprised, I'm pleased to see Zewu-jun will now join us in this."

Jin Guangyao can't be sure *why* Lan Xichen decided to do this after being away from it for so long, but he knows why it is a problem for his father and everyone else. On some occasions, the sects in charge of dealing with the creatures charge excessively for the work and Lanling Jin Sect turns a blind eye because it is convenient and because they too get their share. Gusu being there means they will have to be more careful when *negotiating* and means they won't have the Jin sect to protect them if they are discovered.

"I apologise it is unexpected, but many things are changing."

He doesn't elaborate further and aside from a couple of disdainful looks, no one mentions anything. The conference goes on until the day is done and they all start leaving.

"Er-ge, I'm thankful I can see you doing this well," he says once both are at the bottom of the stairs. "I can't imagine how all this time has been for you. I'm still here for anything you need and I'm sorry."

A more vulnerable and pained expression appears on his face, a small crack in the mask made of jade he now wears that shows how much he's suffering and how far he is from being as fine as he looks. "It hasn't been easy but... I am doing my best to do things right, so thank you, A-Yao."

"No need, I'm sure you are doing your best," he says with a smile. "Hanguang-jun would be pleased."

“I hope,” he whispers before shaking his head. “I will take care of things, Wangji is resting now.”

Jin Guangyao just nods, the pain he sees in the man’s eyes remind him of his own pain after losing his mother. “I’m sure he is,” he says. “Please have a safe trip.”

Lan Xichen smiles at him and even when Jin Guangyao tries to convince himself it is like the one he knew, he fails. Still, he can’t do anything as the other leaves with the few disciples he came with and as he climbs back up the Fragrance Hall, he can’t help but think again and again *why* all of this happened.

“It would be useful if you found out more about what changes he’s talking about,” his father says as soon as he enters. “Being taken by surprise is something I do not like.”

“He’s grieving, father,” he says, removing from his face anything that says how he feels. “It is natural he tries to cope with it by changing things.”

“I still wonder how he died,” Jin Guangshan hums, leaning back on his throne. “His death was convenient, of course, but now we need to proceed with caution with the decisions his brother makes.”

Convenient .

Jin Guangyao is not a hypocrite who condemns his choice of words because, in reality, Lan Wangji’s disappearance helped to make certain things easier. He was the most vocal when it came to defending Wei Wuxian’s actions and under his cold eyes it was practically impossible to do something out of the ordinary... but to put it like that...

“Of course,” he says, giving his father a proper bow before starting to move away. “I will have that information.”

His father hums, that smirk of superiority Jin Guangyao already knows so well appears on his face as he takes another sip of his expensive liquor. “That’s great.”

If his father is incapable of seeing his worth after this, then Jin Guangyao knows who will be conveniently dying, too.

Chapter End Notes

Would like to mention I am following The Untamed timeline and way of handling things, so expect that characterisation for him. JGShit already is horrible.

Thank you so much for reading, don't forget to leave me a comment down there. Sorry for the long wait.

Yunmeng Jiang

Chapter Notes

Friendly reminder that I'm using CQL/The Untamed canon and thus, I'm using the characterisation they gave to JC.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Did you hear the rumours? Some say Lan Wangji is dead.”

For Jiang Cheng, everything started as a rumour he heard one day while walking down the corridors of Lotus Pier and two disciples were chatting while returning from their lecture. He remembers he had stopped walking entirely and had stared at the floor because the words didn't make much sense.

What the fuck happened?

The disciples had frozen upon seeing him and had tried to excuse themselves after seeing his expression, but Jiang Cheng stopped them with a pointed glare before demanding them to repeat what they just said. They repeated the same — *we heard Lan Wangji is dead*— but couldn't give a reliable source because it was just something they heard from someone on their last night-hunt. The Yunmeng leader sent them away after telling them to stop being more interested in gossip than their work but failed to forget about it for the rest of the day and even week.

The cultivation world was a hectic mess after what happened at Nightless City and rumours tended to come out every now and then. Some said Wei Wuxian was still alive and waiting for the moment to attack, others claimed his ghost was now haunting different places and that it was a matter of time before he was consumed by his need for revenge, some even said they could hear him playing his flute in the distance like an ominous sign that said he was coming back. Jiang Cheng ignored most of them because he, as a person, was beyond broken and didn't have time to deal with that kind of nonsense. Wei Wuxian was dead and even when he didn't find his body when he went to look for it, he did find his flute and kept it to assure no one would try to do something with it. Not even mentioning that he had *many* more things to worry about.

Rumours came and went but what made this one especially odd was that it revolved around Lan Wangji instead of Wei Wuxian.

It's not that he could go and ask, obviously. Things with the Second Jade were as bad as they could be. Jiang Cheng had ignored his obvious desire to protect his former martial brother and had ignored his angered *Jiang Wanyin* as he went to end Wei Wuxian's life. Even when he was incapable of stabbing him in the face as he initially wanted, he did cause him to let go

of the only thing keeping him from falling and had turned away as he fell. His relationship with the rest of the sect was merely diplomatic, a sect leader business only, so he couldn't go and ask either.

At the time of Wei Wuxian's death, Jiang Cheng wasn't aware of anything that happened later, his whole world was falling apart and the only thing he could think of was his sister and everything he needed to do so she could rest in peace.

He didn't know what happened with Lan Wangji or even Jin Guangshan who was now in possession of the tally thing Wei Wuxian created, but in retrospect, it is obvious consequences had to come for the man for defending the enemy and it is obvious a sect as rigid as his couldn't let go of it just like that. Still, killing their own second young master felt like something not even the Wen would do.

It was so confusing Jiang Cheng ended up pushing everything away. People didn't need a reason to come up with nonsense, so that rumour was only that, a rumour. Lan Wangji was punished and his disappearance was used by someone with nothing better to do than spread rumours and since his sect wasn't one to engage with gossip, they ignored it.

The letter came to slap him in the face.

A letter from Gusu written by Lan Xichen himself arrives one morning and there, Jiang Cheng finds out that yes, Lan Wangji is dead and the leader is not going to tend to his duties for a while but is leaving someone as a temporary substitute.

The same question comes again: *what the fuck happened?*

Jiang Cheng can't deny it any longer, but it doesn't make any goddamn sense and he feels so *uncomfortable* he even has to leave his office and sit by a secluded pond where no one will be bothering him to think and hope to make sense of what is happening.

Lan Wangji and he were never close, not really. When they studied at the Cloud Recesses Jiang Cheng saw him as this aloof and cold person who wanted to do nothing with anyone who wasn't part of his sect and who was just like his uncle when it came to the rules. During the indoctrination he was the same, but showed a protective side that came to shine against the injustices those Wen committed, during the Sunshot Campaign they were allies and Jiang Cheng never doubted the man's abilities. The only time they shared a slightly closer bond was as they looked for Wei Wuxian, but even then, nothing was about *them*, it was about Wei Wuxian and after his former martial brother pushed him away, that was all. When the now demonic cultivator stood up for the Wen and abandoned his clan, Jiang Cheng had no time to worry about Lan Wangji and what he was doing, so the last time he saw him before the events at Nightless City was at Carp Tower with his brother.

“Why is he dead?”

Despite the nature of their relationship and the obvious issues that appeared after Wei Wuxian's death, it brings Jiang Cheng no joy to know he is dead. They were around the same age, the man was strong, smart and was supposed to achieve great things, he deserved...

No, all of that is just *bullshit*.

Jiang Yanli had a son, a happy marriage and was young, she was supposed to have a long and happy life but she was also gone. His parents weren't the best, but they weren't as bad as Wen Ruohan yet they are dead as well. Lan Wangji is just another person who died when he shouldn't have died and Jiang Cheng feels so dizzy he has to close his eyes and lean on the nearest tree to keep himself from throwing up.

It isn't fair, but Jiang Cheng should know by now that in this freaking world, nothing is fair.

He once more feels like a child filled with the childish need of crying and screaming at everything because it is easier than dealing with the conflicting emotions swirling inside of him. When is everything going to be enough? Everything is fucked up beyond repair now, everything has already changed but not even that seems to be enough for whoever is pulling the strings of everyone up there.

He's so tired, but also knows it doesn't matter.

By the time he has managed to compose himself, the sun is already going down. His head disciple does his best to keep everything professional and not bother him with unnecessary sentimentalists as he gives the report for the day. Jiang Cheng only listens to half of it, but still sends him away when he's done and orders everyone to not interrupt him for the rest of the evening unless it is a real emergency.

It is hard to understand how he feels. Beyond the *uncomfortableness* that presses down against his chest at being reminded that Lan Wangji is dead, he also feels weird while thinking about Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren. Losing a family member isn't easy, hell, he has a lot of experience in that, but then there's this part that wonders how involved they were in his death and how people like them are handling it.

He ends up sighing and writing a formal letter offering his condolences and acknowledging the provisional change, but nothing else.

He doesn't visit.

He doesn't try to involve himself more.

Death has already taken so much from him, so many people, and every time he thinks it's the end, another thing happens. Lan Wangji's death is tragic, of fucking course it is, but what can he do? Nothing, they weren't friends, he's not friends with the surviving family and honestly, who else has been for Jiang Cheng after his sister died? He internally winces at this reasoning, but for the biggest part of himself, it makes a lot of sense.

They all have things to deal with, some parts of the cultivation world are still burning and Jiang Cheng doesn't have the magic solution that helps them with this. Death is final, death has no solutions.

Death is always around.

“Sect Leader Jiang, Zewu-jun is waiting for you.”

Days, weeks and even months go by after Jiang Cheng settles on how to deal with the issue with Lan Wangji and everything else. Life, as it happened when his parents, sister and former martial brother died, continued its course. Conferences started and ended, Lan Xichen’s provisional replacement was diligent and hard-working and was an expert when it came to dealing with people trying to get more information of what happened by feigning good intentions.

People have already stopped trying to get more information from that person by the time Lan Xichen returns, but Jiang Cheng can see the renewed curiosity shining in their eyes on the first conference he attends with Lan Xichen there.

They don’t achieve anything, though.

In appearance, Lan Xichen is mostly the same. He’s still tall, still with an imposing aura and calm expression and while, sure, he’s a bit thinner, he looks better than Jiang Cheng when he lost his family and looked more like a ghost haunting Lotus Pier than the leader, but there’s this *something* that says he has changed. Personality-wise the differences are a bit more noticeable. His smile isn’t as genuine, his tone is a bit curter and even his eyes don’t have this comforting spark Jiang Cheng remembers hearing people say the leader had.

But it is normal, or maybe it is not, but that’s what life has taught Jiang Cheng.

“I need you to behave, A-Yuan, we will visit the bunnies once I’m done with the meeting, alright?”

Jiang Cheng stops millimetres before entering the main hall when he hears Lan Xichen’s voice. It’s obvious he is not talking to him or another adult, it’s clear he’s talking to a child but the name makes his ears ring for a second because he has heard it before, a distant memory that is now wrapped in a dense fog filled with anger and betrayal.

“Sect Leader Jiang, I thank you for coming.”

His mind ends up crashing against a wall when Lan Xichen’s voice pulls him back to the real world and he struggles to once more work like a normal person instead of a fool who is just standing there.

“Sect Leader Lan,” he says after subtly clearing his throat. “Nice to see you.”

Lan Xichen is standing there, but despite Jiang Cheng’s efforts, he ends up looking down at the man’s right where a small child is standing, partially hidden behind the leader’s legs but doing his best to keep himself straight in a clear imitation of how Lan normally behave.

Jiang Cheng recognises him.

He remembers those round eyes staring up at him as his arms hug his legs, remembers seeing him running around in a place filled with resentment as if nothing bad was happening. He knows this is Wen Yuan, the only child left after the extermination of the Wen Clan and he doesn't know how to react.

He didn't even know he was alive, didn't know what happened to him after his family was hanged outside of Nightless City following the death of Jin Zixuan and Jin Zixun. The emotions that were, until then, under control unleash once more and even when he wants to stop behaving like an idiot, he can't find the right words.

"Ah, I apologise. If his presence bothers you, I can send him away," Lan Xichen's voice once more yanks him out of that spiral. "He's done with his classes, but wasn't feeling well."

"No," he finally says, swallowing the huge rock-like thing lodged in his throat. "It's fine."

Wen Yuan doesn't seem to recognise him, he stares at him but doesn't say or do anything that says he remembers who he is and what he said at that time. He's still trying to imitate what the leader does but hurries to sit down as close as he can to the other when he moves further inside the room.

"I apologise I didn't discuss these matters back at the conference, I'm afraid some still have problems getting used to the changes I'm making," Lan Xichen starts, not noticing or maybe ignoring the obvious conflicting emotions inside the other. "I do not wish to spend time explaining them."

With this, Jiang Cheng forces himself to get a hold of his emotions, to really behave like the leader he is. With a small nod, he moves to take a seat where he focuses on Lan Xichen instead of the little kid who is now entertaining himself with the ends of his own forehead ribbon. "I understand, there is no inconvenience."

"Thank you," he says, his expression relaxing a bit. "As you probably already know, our disciples have been participating in requests done by common people from different villages."

"Yes, I'm aware," he replies and it reminds him of how unexpected it had been to hear his disciples saying they saw a Lan group moving around doing the same as them. "It's beneficial for the disciples."

"Yes, that is my only purpose," he nods, apparently happy that he pointed that out. "I have been carefully discussing this with different leaders to avoid misunderstandings or straight-up overstepping, so I would like to talk to you as well."

That is another difference. It's not that the Gusu Lan Sect was a selfish group who only intervened when things were especially bad, no, but dealing with ghouls or small ghosts plaguing somewhere wasn't something they hurried to do. It's a good change, he has to admit, even when his people do their best to help the people of Yunmeng, there are times when everyone is too busy and takes time to tend to said issues.

“I have no problems with it,” he says. “Don’t even mind if your disciples happen to arrive when mine are already there.”

Lan Xichen looks immensely relieved and it makes him wonder just how many assholes he encountered. Personal glory is a sensitive topic for many cultivators, so they probably weren’t really happy about having another sect intervening.

“I thank you for understanding,” he says, looking down at the stack of paper he has on the table. “There are a couple of things I would like to discuss as well.”

Jiang Cheng heard from others that the once rule-follower leader seemed now more interested in changing things that remained the same for years, but he’s surprised to see how many things they actually are. He not only wants to help unprotected and innocent people more, but he also wants to have bigger participation in things that impact the cultivation world, like questioning the decisions other sects make, even if it’s another major one.

Still, even with all of that, Jiang Cheng has the feeling it pales in comparison to the changes happening *inside* the sect itself.

“Uncle, I need to wash it!”

The kid’s voice breaks the fragile stability Jiang Cheng has built around him and the way his hands twitch is probably a huge sign, but thankfully, Lan Xichen is distracted looking at the kid to notice.

“A-Yuan, yes, you will have to wash it,” he says with a small smile. “I’ll help you later, let me finish, please.”

The kid nods, still clutching the end of the forehead ribbon in his chubby hand, completely unaware of how suddenly he spoke and most importantly—

“Uncle?”

The Yunmeng Jiang leader realises a bit too late that he said this out loud and that is equally late to take it back, so what he manages to do is look less like the person on the verge of bursting out in tears of despair and more like someone who just got curious at hearing the child refer to him like that.

“Ah, yes, A-Yuan is my nephew,” Lan Xichen replies with relative ease, though, his eyes stay on the kid instead of the other. “He’s Wangji’s adoptive son.”

There’s pain at the mention of his deceased brother, that mind-consuming heaviness that settles deep into someone’s soul to remind them of happier times where the loved one still lived, but Lan Xichen is quick to hide it as he looks back at Jiang Cheng.

“I see.”

The reunion ends not too long after that, agreements are made and they are both left satisfied with the changes and even when Lan Xichen offers him to stay since the sun is already going down, Jiang Cheng knows he has to leave that place *now*.

Wen Yuan, now Lan Yuan, is alive and is here as Lan Wangji's son and that can only mean that maybe... maybe the man went out to look for Wei Wuxian and found the kid instead. Maybe he had an accident and that's what took his life.

Jiang Cheng doesn't know how to deal with this information, can't even tell why it affects him so much.

The next day he struggles to deal with things before leaving for Lanling to pick Jin Ling up and spend a while listening to Madam Jin complaining about Jin Guangyao, Jin Guangshan and everyone before pretty much ordering Jiang Cheng to protect her grandson as if she didn't know Jiang Cheng is willing to give his life for him already. The world continues moving violently around him until he is finally in his room with his nephew in his arms.

Still, the emotions seem to hit harder at that moment.

His nephew is young, but that is nothing when it comes to everything he has gone through already. Jin Ling lost his father when he was just a month old and his mother shortly after, he won't have memories of them, won't even probably remember how they looked and how their voice sounded, the chance of having a normal life was torn to pieces even when he didn't deserve it at all.

Lan Yuan is not that different.

He doesn't like to even think about it, he's furious at himself for comparing a descendant of those Wen dogs to his own nephew, but behind that anger and disdain, there's a small part that calls him stupid and forces him to think, to understand that the kid has also been through hell and back. His parents died, the family that took care of him died, the *Xian-gege* he seemed to adore died and now the man who saved him is dead as well.

In what world could all of this happen?

He ends up forcing himself to take a deep breath so the little one in his arms can continue sleeping peacefully. Jin Ling is the only good thing in this messy life, but even with that he can't say he regrets not siding with the Wen remnants, they were part of the family that pushed his clan to the verge of extinction and if he follows this thought, going against this last Wen seems to be the only option he has.

No, that's not his only option, he refuses to accept it as such.

It's obvious he won't go to Gusu to offer Lan Xichen's support, he won't go out of his way to assure Lan Yuan has a good life, but maybe the best is just *letting him be*. Jiang Cheng won't get anything from having him murdered by the Jin or any other self-appointed hero and even if it is hard for him to admit it, the kid doesn't deserve it.

His priority is Jin Ling, assure he's safe, assure he grows up and becomes the strong and capable person his mother was sure he was going to be. Before Lan Wangji's death, he was sure he had to actively do something that makes the world a better place for his nephew, one where no one will come up with dark tactics that end up consuming them, but how unpredictable everything is just showed he can't really do it.

Jiang Cheng decides that is the way. He will protect his nephew, the last family member he has and if the world wants to become a mess again, then it will be their problem. He will protect Jin Ling and he doesn't even doubt Lan Xichen will protect that Wen— Lan Yuan.

“Just how many people did you have to take with you, Wei Wuxian?”

Chapter End Notes

I'm implying a couple of things here, but they will become more obvious in later chapters, I promise-

I apologise for being late, but I hope you enjoyed it! Thank you so much for reading and don't forget to leave me a comment down there!

Lan Yuan

Chapter Notes

We don't really have a 100% accurate timeline of how the events were for The untamed, but checking the wiki I got an idea, HOWEVER, I altered the events as well, so please keep it in mind.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Lan Yuan is missing something.

He knows it has to do with his past, that it has to do with that dark void left after he got sick, but he can't quite tell what it is and most of the time he even is incapable of explaining why there are times where he gets this affected when that void live in the back of his mind all the time... but it is like that and it's a feeling that stays with him for the rest of the day.

"Maybe you lost something and forgot about it," Jingyi suggests one day when they are leaving the classroom and he has been dragging the feeling. "Maybe you forgot to memorise one of the rules!"

"I don't think so... I learnt all the ones we were taught!" he says with a small sigh. "It's not the first time it has happened either."

Jingyi doesn't say anything else, but his expression of concern stays with Lan Yuan and even if it doesn't solve anything, it helps him feel a bit better. It's another thing he can't really explain, but knowing someone cares about him fills him with so much joy he can't help but feel that things are going to be alright. It could be normal for a kid his age, really, an eight-year-old kid who doesn't like feeling loved by the people they see as important is not something common, but Lan Yuan feels it is something a bit more special.

When the teachers congratulate him for understanding his lessons and being a good student he feels proud, when Jingyi says he's his best friend he feels happy and when uncle Xichen comforts him at night after waking up from a nightmare he's reassured that things will be alright.

Even with that, though, he can't fully forget about that missing part.

"A-Yuan, Jingyi, I hope your classes went well."

Uncle Xichen greets both when they enter the main hall, his smile calm, soft and genuine making Lan Yuan momentarily forget about the tight emotions inside of him. "We did great!" he exclaims while his friend nods furiously at his side. "We worked hard!"

“I’m glad to hear that,” he says, setting down his brush. “Food is warm and ready for both, so please eat and rest before you get to work on your homework.”

“Are you not eating with us today, uncle?” he asks, it sounds like nothing, but just a small bad thing is enough to make the dark emotions flow again.

“I’m afraid I have too much work that requires my attention,” Lan Xichen says with a small sigh. “I promise I will try my best to have dinner with you.”

Lan Yuan nods with a smile despite his, once more, raging emotions. He knows his uncle is a sect leader and while he doesn’t understand the full extent of what that means, he knows it at least means he has a lot of work that is even more demanding than his own homework.

“Let’s eat, Jingyi!”

It’s easier to push his emotions down while eating with his friend since they have so many things in common, like enjoying having adventures around the Cloud Recesses whenever they have time to have fun or taking care of the bunnies that live in the back of the mountain. Jingyi is scared of ghosts but isn’t scared of climbing trees or running around trying to catch escaping bunnies, so they do more than well.

Beyond their similarities, Lan Jingyi was also the first one to treat him as a normal kid.

It’s not that others treated him badly or that they were mean, but everyone seemed to prefer to stay at a safe distance when he first appeared. Uncle Xichen said it was because they didn’t know him and only needed time, but Lan Yuan feared they just hated him and that it wasn’t going to change and the thought tormented him until Jingyi came to change all of it. He arrived a week later after Lan Yuan did, wearing plain white robes and a, at times, forced smile curling up his lips, but unlike the others, he had no reserves in talking to him after he was told to take the spot next to him. After the initial awkwardness, it was so easy to talk to him that getting to know him happened in the blink of an eye and teaming up for everything happened naturally after that.

Uncle Xichen was happy when he talked about it, too, and it wasn’t long before he invited Jingyi to join both to eat after their classes were done. He was glad both connected so quickly and happy that friendship was helping both to get along with the rest of their classmates, though Lan Yuan kept Jingyi as his best friend and promised that was never going to change.

“Maybe we forgot to get the treats for the bunnies!”

Jingyi’s voice snaps him out of his thoughts, making him look back up from his plate. “Oh, maybe you’re right!”

He knows it is not, but just as it happens with uncle Xichen, he doesn’t want to worry his best friend any longer, so he almost sighs in relief when Jingyi looks proud for helping him and probably thinks it’s the end of it. The conversation goes away from it and it isn’t long before they soon finish eating and busy themselves with their homework.

He’s set on forgetting about it, not allowing it to disturb his routine but...

“What is bothering you, A-Yuan?”

The young kid snuffles when he hears his uncle’s concerned tone. He tried to hide it, he really did, but when the day is done and there’s nothing else to distract him while sitting on his bed he finally finds it impossible and now he’s on the verge of crying while his uncle worries and probably panics.

“I’m sorry uncle,” he says, rubbing his eyes while the other sits at his side. “I forgot something but I don’t know what it is.”

Lan Xichen doesn’t say anything immediately, but his arms are quick to hold him. One of his large hands rubbing soothing circles on his back while the other pats his head softly. “Oh, A-Yuan, please don’t torture yourself with that.”

“But what if it is very important?” he cries, looking up at him. “What if it is about Father?”

There’s pain in his uncle’s eyes as he pulls him closer once more and places a soft kiss on top of his head. Like this, Lan Yuan can hear his heart beating faster, in a way that reminds him of his own whenever he’s close to crying. “Remember that you were very sick.”

Lan Yuan nods because he remembers all of that with horrible clarity. When he woke up in an unfamiliar place with equally unfamiliar people he had been so scared he burst out in tears almost immediately, his cries only increasing in volume for how tired and weak he felt. Fear spiralled out of control until uncle Xichen appeared and reassured him that he shouldn’t be scared anymore, that no one in there wanted to hurt him and that he was there to keep him safe.

When he finally managed to calm down, uncle Xichen, the only person with gentle eyes at that moment, then explained he had been very sick, that a burning fever had kept him bed-ridden and sleeping for a long time but that he was now better thanks to his own internal strength and will to live. He explained he was in the Cloud Recesses, his new home, and even introduced the people in there so he could be sure they meant no harm, eventually asking what he could remember from before waking up so he could also explain it, but Lan Yuan came to the horrible realisation that he *couldn’t remember anything*.

Darkness was the only thing along with muffled voices from different people he couldn’t recognise saying things he couldn’t understand and if he tried hard enough he could also see blurry faces, but that was all and that unknown feeling for a four years old was too much and he soon started crying once more.

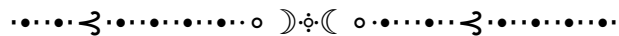
What makes it worse is the fact that it hasn’t really changed now that he’s eight.

His nightmares consist of that same darkness wrapping around him until he wakes up with a start and a horrible sensation of hollowness that makes him cry until his uncle hugs him and reassures him that he is here, that he is safe and loved, very loved. The things he remembers are not that different from the ones he remembered while was four, the same unknown voices that don’t make him feel something familiar coming out of people with blurry faces that are even more terrifying in the dark.

“I know it is hard, confusing, and you don’t deserve to go through it,” his uncle whispers, still holding him tightly in his arms. “But you know you can’t force it, the physicians have said there’s a chance you progressively remember... Just know, just be very sure that Wangji and your family loved you dearly, they were great people who loved you.”

Lan Yuan nods, squeezing his eyes shut before burying his face in his chest once more. Yes, even if he can’t remember things clearly or remember at all, he knows he can’t forget that they were good people and that they loved him. Being loved, being wanted, that’s one of the few things Lan Yuan has and he is committed to not letting anyone take it away from him.

Uncle Xichen said one of Father’s last wishes was for him to be safe because he loved him and so, he came to the conclusion that honouring that wish was the best thing he could do.



Lan Yuan hates crying.

It isn’t hard to reach this conclusion, really. When he was younger he used to do it all the time because the world was a scary place for a four-year-old and because his mind of a toddler couldn’t fully understand that people pointing out a flaw wasn’t necessarily because they hated him but because they wanted him to improve, so to hate crying came naturally. He despises the way his eyes sting, the way the tears make his surrounding a blurry mess, and despises the way his chest tightens as if someone is pressing down against it.

Sadly, he ends up learning that crying is a very natural reaction.

Uncle Xichen has explained that emotions can easily overwhelm someone and that people’s reactions to this can be different. Some cry, some get angry and a few others will prefer to keep everything inside of them, and while this last option wasn’t the best, he made sure Lan Yuan understood it was acceptable. If he wished he could reserve his emotions to himself, but if he wanted to express them for everyone to see it was equally fine. No one scolded him when he burst out in tears in the middle of a class and no one scolded them when he and his friends laughed out loud while playing around. Some elders walked away and that was weird, but others merely reminded them that they had to be respectful of others and that yelling all the time wasn’t pleasant.

A very normal reaction for very normal situations, but Lan Yuan still hates it, and he does it more now that he’s ten.

“Uncle...?”

Lan Xichen pushes his forehead off the floor when he hears his voice, his red eyes widening as he looks at him, hands frantically trying to wipe the tears off his face even when it is completely futile since his shoulders are still shaking and soft sobs are spilling out of his mouth.

“A-Yuan, I—” he stutters, struggling for what feels like a long time before he eventually gives up and closes his eyes. “I’m sorry, come here.”

With hurried steps he makes his way to him and kneels at his side, his eyes fixed on his face instead of the stone they have in front. He's worried, if he hates crying, he hates seeing the people he loves crying even more.

"Uncle, what's wrong?" he tries, holding onto his arm. "Are you hurt? Do I need to call a physician?"

"I am hurt," he admits after some time of holding back hiccups and sobs. "But I do not need you to call anyone, just stay here, please."

He didn't need to ask, of course, Lan Yuan is staying here even if he's not asked to, so he sits on his heels and wraps both arms around his uncle's arm, pressing his head against his shoulder as he tries to mimic what the man has done for him every time he starts crying or is scared. In return, Lan Xichen's sobs and emotions come out with renewed strength and his hand comes to rest on the stone still standing in front of them, giving the impression that he will collapse if he doesn't.

Lan Yuan is honestly lost. Uncle and he were having breakfast yesterday when one of the disciples came running and delivered a letter his uncle read before jolting out of his seat and excusing himself in a rushed way. Later on, that same disciple informed Lan Yuan that their leader had to leave for Qinghe and was returning the next day and that was all. It was unexpected, yes, but it wasn't the first time it happened.

Being a sect leader means taking care of unexpected things, leaving for days to attend conferences and other things the young kid still can't fully understand but has a better understanding of them than when he was eight. Uncle had something to do there but was coming back and they would talk about it while having dinner. As it usually happens, Uncle will feel bad for leaving him alone for so long, but they will go back to their routine in no time.

That, however, is not the case.

That morning and once classes are done, Lan Yuan realises his uncle hasn't returned. He's not in the main hall, it's not in their hansi and when he questions one of the disciples he says he only knows he isn't back but doesn't have a reason.

Worry is quick to seize his chest because uncle Xichen is his family and in recent years it has become even more painfully obvious that outside of him and Uncle Lan Qiren, who he rarely sees, he doesn't seem to have more family. Jingyi is like a brother and the elders are attentive enough to make him feel good, but the only two people who are his direct family are those two and he... he doesn't want to lose him.

He doesn't think he's strong enough to deal with it.

"Lan Yuan, Zewu-jun is back."

He still feels bad because he left Jingyi standing outside of the classroom with nothing more than a see you later, but finding his uncle was crucial and it became, even more, when the disciple informed *where* the leader had gone to. Lan Yuan feels glad for hurrying.

“You sweet, innocent child,” his uncle whispers without raising his head. “I shouldn't be worrying you with this, you shouldn't see me like this but...”

He can't finish his sentence, another sob leaves his mouth as his hand tightens the hold he has on the stone. “Uncle, it's alright...”

“My sworn brother suffered a qi deviation and—” He doesn't finish, but he doesn't need to, Lan Yuan immediately can tell what happened.

“Sect Leader Nie?” he asks, squeezing his arm more when he nods.

He knew the man. Out of the two sworn brothers his uncle had, Nie Mingjue was the one who stood up a bit more prominently for him thanks to his height and rough exterior. When he was younger he even remembers being scared of him, though, after a while, he learnt that he didn't need to fear him either. He was nice in his own way and Uncle Xichen looked comfortable when he was around.

Most importantly, Nie Mingjue is—was—one of the few who could comfort Lan Xichen.

It is not that it happened regularly, really, whenever Lan Yuan was around Lan Xichen was this calm and attentive person who seemed capable of lifting a mountain if the young child needed it, but there were times when he broke down. It normally happened late at night or when Lan Yuan wasn't supposed to be there; Silent tears rolled down the man's face as he clutched something close to his chest, sobs made his shoulder shake as he pressed his head against a wall and, on certain occasions, the man collapsed against Nie Mingjue's chest as he cried.

“What happened?” he asks after a moment of painful silence.

“You knew about his *condition*,” he says after swallowing the lump in his throat. “It worsened, severely, and a body has its limits.”

Just like that he's gone and it is terrifying to think how fast someone can go from living and hanging on to succumbing and dying. The fragility of life is scary, terrifyingly scary and it reminds him of how his own life has been. Even when he doesn't remember those years before waking up here in the Cloud Recesses, he knows he had important people that loved him, important people that also died.

As he follows this thought he looks up from the floor to stare at the pillar in front of them, his dark eyes staying on the *Lan Wangji* beautifully engraved there. Father died as well and even when he was a strong and capable cultivator.

“Your Father, Wangji, he was strong too and when I lost him I promised things were going to change for the better and now,” Lan Xichen whispers. “Huaisang is devastated and I feel so guilty.”

“But Uncle, it is not your fault,” he says because he knows the man works a lot. “You tried to help, didn't you?”

“I did, but I could have done more,” he says immediately, his fingers caressing the name. “I could have tried to play for him more often, a couple of days a month was not enough for his condition. I could have looked for someone to play for him, teach someone—”

He once more stops abruptly and his eyes go to Lan Yuan who is still clinging to his arm, aside from the pain he looks remorseful and even panicked for a moment. Lan Yuan fears he did something wrong, but his uncle only turns to hug him properly.

“I shouldn’t be bothering you with this, A-Yuan,” he says, holding onto him. “You don’t need to worry about this, your only concern should be growing up strong and happy.”

“I don’t want uncle to feel sad,” he mumbles, holding him back. “If you’re happy, then I am too.”

“Sweet one,” he says with a choked chuckle. “I will be alright, I promise... I just need time.”

“As I needed it, right?” he asks, once more using his experiences to understand better. “It’s alright to be sad!”

Lan Xichen pulls back enough to look at him and the look he receives is one full of pride. “You already are such a wonderful young one, Wangji would be proud.”

Lan Yuan’s smile falters for a second, his eyes going back to the grave. “Are you sure, uncle? I want him to be proud, to bring honour to his memory.”

“Nothing you do would ever make him feel disappointed,” he says, his amber eyes too moving towards the grave. “Wangji had this aloof and cold personality on the outside, but he had the purest heart and everything you have done till now would make him feel really proud.”

“I can’t believe he was that cold-looking, if he looked like you it’s impossible!” he says with a faint pout.

“We were similar, yes, but our personality was one of the things that made us different,” he explains with a fond yet sad smile. “Wangji’s eyes were also lighter than mine and some said they froze them in place, for me, they were very expressive.”

“They were surely exaggerating!” he whines, though, it’s amusing to imagine.

“He was in charge of carrying out the punishments, he was the best student the Gusu Lan Sect has seen,” he chuckles. “He had to be sure people respected our rules.”

“Who would disrespect our rules?” They are easy to follow!

There’s a slightly distant expression that appears on his uncle’s face and his eyes even leave the grave to stare at the floor. “We have changed a lot, A-Yuan. We grew up differently and Wangji tended to be very busy during certain periods of time.”

Lan Yuan is incapable of understanding how different they could be, they are all reasonable even for a kid his age. “Oh... but Father is still amazing!”

“He was, just like you.”

To hear about him makes him feel all giddy and happy inside, he loves hearing about him and loves hearing that his hard work is paying off, but once the happiness of the moment passes, he's once more hit by reality. Everything he has about him are memories told by his uncle, he doesn't have a clear memory of how he looked, how his voice sounded or how it was the first time they met and that turns Lan Wangji into yet another person he is sure he loves but can't remember.

How can someone lose so many people while being so young?

It sounds unfair and it probably is, but it is his reality and said reality is what reminds him that family is what matters most. Tightening his arms more around his uncle, he nods before speaking again, “It will be alright, uncle... we're together.”

He can feel Lan Xichen nodding as well as his emotions once more run wild, though, he too seems to be grounding himself with the warmth of Lan Yuan's body in his arms.

“It will,” he whispers. “You will be safe.”

Chapter End Notes

More things that have changed are shown, LXC is doing his best to be a loving and understanding uncle... but NMJs till died (notice the circumstances were different). The few things missing to understand all of this will be explained in the next and final chapter, the most painful one:

Wei Wuxian.

Thank you so much for reading, sorry I'm late, but don't forget to leave me a comment down there!

Wei Wuxian - Part I

Chapter Notes

Aha, please note the differences between the story told by the show and what's going on here, thank you.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

He wasn't supposed to wake up.

Among the intense headache that seems to pierce his brain, Wei Wuxian feels the pang of confusion and anxiousness that wash over his entire body as he realises that yes, he is waking up in a body that feels everything that happens around it and is no longer in that emptiness he was for heavens know how long.

When he opens his eyes he finds a mess of talismans and other things he recognises as things needed to perform a ritual placed around a small room. The stench of blood makes him scrunch his nose and groan as he pushes himself up and is rewarded with an even worse type of pain that feels as if someone has hit him in the head with the heaviest rock.

He is not given time to understand things further, of course. The doors are thrown open and a bunch of what he would describe as bullies move around destroying and throwing things around, even kicking him back down to the floor when he tries to stand up. The ugly-looking leader of said bullies laughs at him, calls him a lunatic, dares him to accuse him of doing something to his parents again and says something about being kicked out for being a disgrace.

Such a warm welcome.

His head is still spinning, but once alone, Wei Wuxian decides to take a moment to understand what is going around instead of fully panicking or letting his anger win. He is alive, someone called Mo Xuanyu was so miserable and filled with hatred that he decided to sacrifice himself in order to bring him back so he could have his revenge on whoever made him so miserable. There are four wounds on his arm that he knows won't heal until those four people are dead.

"Did no one tell him the dead want to stay dead?" he whispers as he rubs his forehead. "I shouldn't be here."

He has no other option, though. If he doesn't do what this Mo Xuanyu brought him to do then he will die and have his soul consumed so he never, ever comes back to experience a better life and while he is aware of the mistakes he made and how he doesn't really deserve good things, such a torturing end is not what he wants.

When he let himself fall from that cliff he made a decision and can't help but wonder why not even that was respected.

In the end, he guesses he knows the answer. The feared Yiling Patriarch was the biggest representation of evil in the world, so offering his body to bring him back in hopes of fulfilling his revenge made sense.

Ah, he really wishes he was still dead.

Exploring outside proves to be a good idea that's also to be a bad one at the same time. One of the bullies from before, a servant he can tell now, demands to know who allowed him to get out and has the time of his life calling him names while making fun of basically everything he is. Among the bad, however, Wei Wuxian gets that Mo Xuanyu wears the mask he found next to him after waking up everywhere, that he was kicked out of Carp Tower for an unknown reason and that he fell from grace in every single possible way.

It is ridiculous that he got brought back by someone the world also seems to despise, but at this point, this is how things seem to go for him.

Leaving the confused servant behind, Wei Wuxian ventures further into the large residence. With the information he got he dares to guess the people who Mo Xuanyu despised are here so he needs to find the best way to deal with this without needing to reach *that* conclusion, but then he runs into them.

The pure white and light blue immediately catch the light as they move down one of the many corridors. With the graciousness they carry and the perfect posture, Wei Wuxian knows the Gusu Lan Sect is there without even needing to have them in front of him, so he decides to look away when they walk past him and ignores the discrete looks that say they are confused by his appearance but are obviously too nice to say something.

Wei Wuxian doesn't know why they are there, but the fact that they all look so young says it is nothing that serious. The sect wouldn't send juniors to deal with something dangerous, but at the same time, he is curious about what all of this is about and, well...

Wei Wuxian wonders if *he* will be around.

He can't be sure how long he has been dead, but someone with the level of cultivation Lan Wangji had is bound to live a long, long time. Wei Wuxian is sure that he can even become immortal if he is committed to it, so it's better to be safe than sorry. Taking hold of the mask, he is quick to put it on before starting to follow where the group of juniors are heading.

If he's supposed to be a lunatic, then he will take advantage of it.

The main hall has a lot of people at the door trying to take a look at the important cultivators that arrived while the lady of the house adorns everything in their village to give the juniors the best impression. When Madam Mo decides to add that they have someone who has had contact with a powerful clan, he decides to step in.

In these few minutes he has come up with the idea that maybe, just maybe, Mo Xuanyu's need for revenge could be sated by humiliating them in front of everyone, to have everyone see they are not the important people they claim to be and are instead cruel, unfair and pretentious. He makes sure that everyone hears his complaints and cries of being abused, he even manages to have Mo Ziyuan *hitting* him in front of everyone so the whispers and pointing fingers increase and the whole family is humiliated in front of a group of cultivators that come from one of the three biggest sects and their own people.

He doesn't expect one of the Gusu disciples to intervene before he's hit for real, but it's fine.

With a bottle that ends up having water instead of liquor, Wei Wuxian leaves the main hall only to realise that killing the family is apparently the only answer. The wounds on his arm are still there, stinging and bleeding lightly as realisation falls heavily on top of him. They don't seem to be good people, they are the complete opposite, but how can he end them without being killed too?

With a tired sigh, Wei Wuxian looks away when he sees the servant from before, A-Tong, guiding the group of juniors somewhere else. By now Wei Wuxian knows they are there to deal with some evil things going around and it's not really his problem, but then he sees the flags they are using and his curiosity forces him to follow them once more.

It is absurd that the same great sects who prided themselves on condemning everything he did are now using one of his creations, but he's honestly beyond that. When he makes a show of taking one of the flags to look at it closer despite having one of the disciples getting mad at him, he realises it is well drawn and will work perfectly for what they want to use it for, meaning that they studied what he did.

"Give it back or I will hurt you!" The loud junior, who another calls Jingyi, says.

Wei Wuxian finds it amusing how he doesn't seem to possess that natural calmness all Lan have, it even makes him consider teasing him but goes against it and still plays his part, pretending to childishly play with the flag until that same disciple from before steps in. His voice is softer, his tone gentle and overall he seems to respect him even when everyone else has treated him as a lunatic who has no rights and who is not even worth treating like a human. Wei Wuxian can't help but smile lightly. He brings out that natural teasing nature Lan Wangji also brought out of him, but when he turns a bit to do so, he feels as if he's been struck by lightning.

The primarily white with blue details robes the junior is wearing remind him of that first time he saw Lan Wangji right outside of the Cloud Recesses. He remembers that calm way of walking, the perfect posture and elegance he carried around no matter what happened and with that comes everything else.

How can he even forget Lan Wangji?

The man was one of the last things he saw before dying, his voice one of the last things he heard. There's nothing in this world that makes him forget about him, not even the fact that he knows how much he hurt him with everything that happened.

“Senior Mo?”

The junior’s voice brings him out of that whirlpool of memories but the remnants of emotions are still fresh and so he decides to hide everything by childishly running away after stomping on the flag.

Lan Wangji, however, doesn't leave his mind.

Until now he hadn’t really had the chance of thinking about the situation as a whole and everything that comes with it. His only worry so far has been trying to find a way to solve the problem Mo Xuanyu left him with, but now that something came to remind him of his previous life, he can’t just ignore it. He has no idea how long he has been gone from this world, but everyone who existed at his time, and who didn’t die because of him or whatever, has to be here and facing them sounds inevitable.

How would Jiang Cheng react if he saw him?

How would Lan Wangji react?

The sole idea makes his head throb, the fear and anxiousness seizing his chest as he goes back to that messy room and lets his body fall heavily. He didn’t ask to be back, he didn’t want to be alive again, he is sure he made the best choice back then and it is not fair he’s brought back to suffer all of this.

Then again, the world isn’t fair and he already knows.

The rest of the evening is uneventful. He can hear people hurrying to go to their rooms as soon as the sun is gone and those juniors finishing with the preparations, so he decides to just stay back and distract himself with a melody that, unsurprisingly enough, he remembers hearing from Lan Wangji at one point. He can’t really remember when or under what circumstances he heard it, but the soft tone helps him calm down the raging emotions remembering the past unleashed inside of him and it's exactly what he needs.

Life, however, has other plans yet again.

From one moment to another he’s dragged out of his room and thrown right in front of the Lan cultivators without his mask and while he is sure they are too young to recognise who he really is, he’s not excited to have them just staring at him.

Things are a nightmare in the main hall. Mo Ziyuan is clearly possessed or infected by something and Wei Wuxian, or Mo Xuanyu, is being accused of doing it because he apparently possesses knowledge of dark tricks and it’s obvious that he did something to the innocent Mo Ziyuan after what he did earlier that day. The nice and caring disciple once more defends him and saves him from being hit by a very distressed Madam Mo who wants everyone to pay for his son’s condition, but she isn’t a reasonable person.

She’s set on blaming Wei Wuxian, but when they find the stupid son took a flag with him from the cultivators, she shifts to blame the juniors and this time, it is Wei Wuxian’s time to defend the disciples by calling out the son’s stupidity at deliberately breaking the rules.

Wei Wuxian learns that the young man's name is Lan Sizhui and he can't help but wonder who the person who gave him his courtesy name misses.

"We can't deal with this, we need to send a signal."

Things, however, get worse because of course they do. Mo Ziyuan dies, one of the wounds is gone as soon as he's subdued by Lan Sizhui and Wei Wuxian, his father and A-Tong follow suit, leaving only two marks in less than five minutes, but that aside, it proves this goes beyond their capabilities.

"A signal...that's not necessary," he still tries because whoever is in the position to aid the younger generations is around the age Wei Wuxian would have and they, of course, know him. "I can deal with it!"

They ignore him, as expected.

"But who is around? It could take them a long time to arrive," Lan Jingyi says. "I don't remember where they were heading..."

"We can't be sure, but we can't risk the rest of the people here," Lan Sizhui sighs. "Send the signal, I'll start preparing things."

Wei Wuxian feels his heart falling when the blue signal flies into the sky and explodes to form their characteristic symbol. With his luck he's sure it will be Lan Wangji the one arriving and while it is better than having one of the many Lan who hated him, he doesn't want to face him, not yet. He's not ready.

"Well, I'll have to hurry, then."

With the death of Mo Ziyuan and his father, Wei Wuxian has two corpses at his disposition and while he hesitates in using them since it will confirm he is capable of using demonic cultivation, he ends up doing it when Madam Mo also succumbs to this dark spirit and starts attacking the juniors who are incapable of going against her.

The battle between the three corpses reminds him a bit of the Sunshot Campaign where those vicious creatures attacked everyone, the two he can control do their best to go against the one controlled by the spirit and even when there are times where it seems that thing is even more powerful than the two of them, they manage. Wei Wuxian's main concern is keeping the juniors safe, the spirit has already pushed them to the floor and surely injured one of them and they are too nice to deal with it.

But then he hears it.

A single note pierces the night, hitting the three corpses with a powerful wave of spiritual energy that subdues them almost instantly. That alone says a lot about the level of cultivation the person possesses and while Wei Wuxian was already expecting it, he's surprised to hear a flute instead of a zither. The only person he can think of who uses a flute in Gusu is—

“Zewu-jun!” the juniors cry out, hurrying towards the middle of the yard while Wei Wuxian hurries to hide behind a pillar. “You’re here!”

To Wei Wuxian’s surprise, the Gusu Lan leader lands a couple of steps away from the juniors and with an unnatural quick pace hurries to reach them, his hand immediately going to hold Lan Sizhui’s arm while his eyes move rapidly to check for injuries.

“I saw the signal,” he says, his voice, unlike his behaviour, controlled and soft. “Are you all alright?”

“We are now,” Lan Jingyi says, relieved. “Things got very complicated from one moment to another.”

“I believe it has to do with that sword,” Lan Sizhui continues, pointing at the sword left on the floor. “We apologise for causing problems.”

“You didn’t cause any problems,” Lan Xichen says firmly, still holding onto the younger disciple. “I am glad I was nearby and glad I arrived before anyone got hurt.”

Despite talking in general and focusing on everyone, Wei Wuxian can see the leader’s attention constantly moving back to Lan Sizhui and his well-being and while a bit odd, an idea little by little starts to form inside his head.

“What kind of vicious spirit is hiding there?” another disciple asks.

“I’m afraid it’s not a spirit,” the man replies, finally moving away from the young disciple to pick the sword up, a frown appearing on his face. “It’s spiritual energy and the very dangerous kind.”

Wei Wuxian can’t help but think it can be related to the ritual used to summon him back and a part of him is guilty about being in the middle of something like this once more, but he ends up shaking his head and slipping away while they are still distracted.

At least three marks are gone.

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“I was gone for sixteen years, in sixteen years a lot of things happen, don’t you think?”

He doesn't get an answer, of course, donkeys don't talk and this in specific is so stubborn he can barely believe it, but what he saw back in Mo village still follows him and he needs to let it out. Lan Xichen is a caring person by nature, so it isn't unnatural to have him worrying about their disciples, but there are many things that seem to say there's something more.

For starters, sect leaders aren't normally the ones who show up when a group of juniors ask for help. Even if they are around, they are usually tending to more important matters and wouldn't leave them behind to aid because they know there are other seniors who can step in.

Wei Wuxian himself was expecting Lan Wangji to appear, so why would Lan Xichen be there?

“Quite obvious,” he snorts, leaning on the donkey when they stop by a tree. “The heir of the Gusu Lan Sect is there.”

The only reason why the sect leader himself would be moving to aid a group of juniors would be if a group had an important person and who would be more important than the heir? The fact that all of them appeared to be part of the direct bloodline seems to confirm it.

“Well, I guess he would also run to aid them if that Lan Sizhui was Lan Zhan’s son...”

Something inside of him hurts when he thinks about it, but he ends up shaking his head. What was he expecting? The world didn’t stop after he died and Lan Wangji obviously moved on, though, moved on from what? They were nothing more than friends; even that was questionable because Wei Wuxian walked away from the path the others valued and rejected his help all the time.

“I have to say it’s hard to imagine Lan Zhan with someone,” he chuckles without a single gram of humour. “I mean, people change, but to have a wife and a kid...”

He knows he’s dumb. He met Lan Wangji while both were teenagers and even when that cold and serious teen seemed set on being alone for the rest of his life, many things could have changed and if he found love and is now living happily, then he should be happy as well.

In fact, it shouldn't even matter. If Lan Sizhui is Lan Xichen’s son, it's fine, if he’s Lan Zhan’s son, it’s equally fine, his opinion doesn’t matter, he has many more things he needs to worry about.

Like the presence of a monster eating people’s souls.

People aren’t exactly sure of what the creature is or how it moves around, they just know about several cases where people have died after having their souls stolen, with only one girl surviving the ordeal but being too far gone to actually give information. Wei Wuxian even discovers that several rogue cultivators and a couple of clans are already doing their best to get this prized hunt.

It is decided, then, that Wei Wuxian needs to live this life in a better way... problem is, whoever is behind all of this seems to want him to suffer by messing things up.

When he finds a seemingly arrogant Jin cultivator who refuses to let out a small group of rogue cultivators who fell in his nets, he calls him out and questions if his mother didn’t teach him better, wanting to bring him down a bit but instead making the young one react with a level of anger that Wei Wuxian thought was only reserved for older people who have lived a lot.

“What do you think you’re doing to him?”

The voice locks him in his place, his heart jumping widely inside his chest as he releases the spell he used to keep the boy down, allowing him to jump to his feet and hurry towards the newly arrived figure.

“He’s getting in something that doesn’t involve him at all! That lunatic!” the junior cries. “All while using demonic cultivation.”

By the end of Wei Wuxian’s first life, Jiang Cheng had already changed a lot. The little innocence the man carried before everything went to hell was gone, leaving him with a perpetual scowl and unforgiving eyes people normally fled from. The Jiang Cheng of the present is not that different.

His level of cultivation keeps him looking like someone in his twenties, he still wears his purple robes, with Zidian resting on his finger and wrist, and his overall expression and posture are the same unforgiving one he used to have. When his eyes fall on Wei Wuxian, they seem to harden, mouth twitching in a displeased sneer.

“Who gave you the right to do something to him using such disgusting methods?” he bites out every word, Wei Wuxian even thinks he can see Zidian sparkling. “Have a fucking death wish or what?”

“I...” He doesn’t know what to say, he wasn’t ready to face him and he probably never will, but he is here and doesn’t know what to do or say.

“If you’re so eager to take advantage of someone, then fight me,” he says, his sharp eyes glaring even more at him as he rests his hands on his sword. “I don’t even care if you use your stupid tricks.”

“Jiujiu—”

“Shut up, Jin Ling.”

Jin Ling.

Wei Wuxian feels as if his whole world is once more falling on top of him. Jin Ling is the name Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan gave to their only son, if the kid didn’t have a mother who taught him better it’s because of him, if the kid is an orphan it is because of him as well and the pain that seems to dig its claws inside his chest is almost enough to kill him once more.

“I don’t want to fight...” he whispers, taking a trembling step back.

“Fight me!”

“I believe it would be better if no one fought.”

The calm voice seems to break the atmosphere charged with every single negative thing in the world, freeing the spell that seemed to keep Wei Wuxian in his place and allowing him to walk further away from the other two. Jiang Cheng’s burning eyes snap to the other leader, still glaring and still looking as if he will whip out Zidian at any moment.

“Should I just let a lunatic hurt my nephew?” he asks when the other leader along with his disciples stops between both. “Is letting them deal with everything alone a new rule?”

The words seem to hold a deeper meaning that Wei Wuxian is incapable of understanding, but Lan Xichen apparently does because he takes a moment to regain his composure before speaking, “Of course not, Sect Leader Jiang. My only wish is to avoid unnecessary conflicts, I believe it wasn’t his intention to attack.”

Wei Wuxian’s muscles lock again when Lan Xichen glances at him and the eyes of everyone else fall on him. “No, I could never hurt him...” he says, as clearly as he can. “It was just a reaction. I agree he should be safe.”

Jin Ling snorts. “You damn lunatic, if my jiujiu wasn’t here you would have done more!”

“Young master, I too believe Senior Mo didn’t have bad intentions, he helped us not long ago,” Lan Sizhui says, Wei Wuxian feels that turmoil of emotions coming back to him.

“What do you know?” Jin Ling hisses. “He’s crazy, he was kicked out for being like that, you don’t know him at all, he’s a disgrace to the family.”

So Mo Xuanyu really is one of the illegitimate kids of Jin Guangshan. What a way to complicate everything even more.

“On our way here, we stumbled upon several cultivators trapped in nets and they had to be let out, I apologise,” Lan Xichen says after a moment. “We will cover the price of the ones who had to be cut, but we apologise for the inconvenience.”

Jiang Cheng still looks like killing someone and Wei Wuxian is even considering letting the man do it for what he told Jin Ling, but to his surprise, his former brother returns his eyes to him and stares at him for several agonising seconds before speaking.

“Stay away from him and Yunmeng, next time things won’t end well for you,” he says, each word filled with anger before looking back at his nephew. “Don’t you have a monster to find?”

With one last disdainful look directed at him, Jin Ling hurries away from the group and Jiang Cheng follows after a moment, not speaking another word.

“I thank you for aiding Sizhui and our disciples,” Lan Xichen says after a moment, turning to look at him with the same calm expression he remembers seeing in him in his first life, though, there’s *something* different. “Please stay safe.”

When they are gone as well, Wei Wuxian collapses against the tree. His head is spinning, his heart is beating erratically and he even feels dizzy, so dizzy. So many things happened in so little time and he’s not sure how to deal with it. He just arrived and had already hurt who Jiang Yanli once mentioned was going to be his nephew, he just returned and has already angered Jiang Cheng so much he will kill him if they meet again.

To top it all, the situation with Lan Xichen and Lan Sizhui.

He didn't need to mention Sizhui first and then the rest of his disciples, they were all a group and even when the young disciple seemed to be the leader, he was still part of the group. He didn't seem to do it on purpose, however, it seemed more like an unconscious thing one does because they are too used to putting that person on top of everything and that just seems to confirm that he is not just another member of the direct bloodline but someone very, very important.

Wei Wuxian is probably cursed to have a miserable life and the world seems to confirm it as the day progresses.

Worried about Jin Ling's and the other juniors' safety, he decides to investigate further and after finding a graveyard for a deceased group of people that leave him on the verge of pulling at his hair, he discovers that the culprit is a statue he and Lan Zhan sealed a long time ago.

It's scary how often Lan Zhan keeps coming back.

By the time he reaches the path leading towards the temple the villagers talked about, a group of juniors is already fleeing. Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui are quick to get near him and Wei Wuxian scolds them for not having more emergency flair to call their seniors, though, makes sure to evaluate just how ready they are to face the world. He has no weapons and the core Mo Xuanyu has is still too weak, meaning he can try to slow it down but will never be capable of defeating it as he did years ago.

And then the statue appears chasing Jin Ling.

Wei Wuxian's mind goes into a frenzy as he looks around trying to find what to do. He already failed Jiang Yanli and condemned her son to be an orphan, he can't just let him die. His solution comes in the form of an improvised flute he cuts with one of the junior's swords. It sounds horrible and his and everyone's ears will probably bleed from the atrocious sound, but he doesn't care, he only needs something strong enough to defeat this thing.

Wen Ning's appearance is not what he expected.

According to what happened that night, Wen Ning and Wen Qing were burnt and their ashes were scattered around as one last mocking action the ones with the power could do. The cultivation world stated Wen Ning was too powerful and unstable to be kept alive and supposedly ended him, but somehow he's here, looking a bit more like the irrational puppet Wei Wuxian first used than the sentient one he was after the ritual was successful.

"It's that demon!"

"It's the ghost general!"

The reactions to seeing him haven't changed and Wei Wuxian knows they will want to attack him, so he hurries to play that same song he remembers hearing from Lan Wangji to calm him enough so he escapes. He has the feeling that many things are hiding from him and he hopes he will have the chance to find him again.

“You again?!”

Wei Wuxian takes a deep breath before turning back to find Jiang Cheng glaring at him, this time having Zidian out and ready to whip him to oblivion. Wei Wuxian swears he can even feel the electricity running down his spine, but even with that, Lan Xichen once more manages to distract him when he runs to reach Lan Sizhui and the rest of his disciples.

“Hey, it’s not my fault he happened to be here as well,” he tries, this time trying not to be that obvious in who he is. “I found these kids and intervened when it was clear they couldn’t defeat that statue.”

Jiang Cheng is probably seeing red. “You can’t fool me, Wei Wuxian.”

It feels as if he has been punched right in the chest.

“Wei Wuxian? He’s not Wei Wuxian! He’s Mo Xuanyu,” Lan Jingyi claims from somewhere behind him. “Sect Leader, it is said you killed him, so it can’t be him!”

Jiang Cheng isn’t that interested in replying to him, his eyes are still fixed on Wei Wuxian and he doesn’t know what to do. That inner struggle that wants to accept punishment goes against the one that says he needs to reach the end of this.

“How can I be someone who has been dead for a long time?” he eventually says, attempting to laugh it off. “I heard your warning the first time, Sect Leader Jiang and have no intention of going against it!”.

“You little—”

“I’m afraid there are several things that require our attention, Sect Leader Jiang,” Lan Xichen intervenes. “I also agree that Young Master Mo meant no harm, so let us focus on the pressing matters.”

He can see the anger shining in Jiang Cheng’s eyes, can see how he just wants to whip him with Zidian until he can’t move and can see how he is sure Mo Xuanyu isn’t there. Somehow his former brother knows he is Wei Wuxian pretending to be someone else and he’s oh, so sure that he won’t let go of it that when he turns to look at Jin Ling, he is confused.

“Are you waiting for an invitation?” he hisses. “Let’s go.”

Jin Ling hurries behind his uncle after glancing at them one last time and with him, the rest of the Yunmeng group walks away.

Wei Wuxian feels like collapsing, so after letting out a long sigh, he plasters the best mischievous smile he has before turning to look at the rest. “Well, Sect Leader, kids, I’m leaving, thanks for the intervention.”

“Please wait,” Lan Xichen says, of course, this isn’t over. “I would like to talk to you about the issue I mentioned.”

“Sure... How can I help though? I really don’t know much about what’s going on with the world,” he says with a shrug, trying to act as nonchalantly as he can. “I just happened to be around.”

“You possess knowledge in the demonic cultivation area,” the leader replies, glancing back at his juniors who stay close enough to hear but far enough to be respectful. “The sword we found back at Mo village appears to be charged with said energy and I’m afraid we don’t know much about that area, so I would like to ask you to come with us to analyse it.”

Wei Wuxian can feel his heart missing a couple of beats when he hears it. Going with them means going to Gusu and the idea is enough to push him closer to the edge of this new precipice. The people there hate him, the people there will recognise him, not even mentioning that *he* will be there.

He’s not sure he’s ready to confirm that Lan Zhan has moved on.

“Going to the Cloud Recesses?” he asks with a forced chuckle. “No way they would accept me there.”

Lan Xichen looks confused, Wei Wuxian has to give him how nice he is. “Excuse me?”

“I mean, demonic cultivation is evil!” he exclaims, waving the flute he just created. “How can Lan get tainted by that? It would be better if it is taken somewhere else.”

“Demonic Cultivation is, at its core, evil, but throughout the years it has proved to be useful,” he says, Wei Wuxian freezes again. “Many of the myths that extended in the past have been proven wrong and, as an example, we use certain techniques that were born from that principle.”

Wei Wuxian is sure that he is dreaming because there is no way someone from the most righteous sect, let alone the sect leader, is accepting something that was true since day one but no one admitted. There needs to be something else, he really—

“Ah, but I’m sure not everyone is as nice as you,” he laughs, shaking his head. “The grandmaster, uh, Lan Qiren, yes, he surely despises the idea.”

“You have heard about him...?” Lan Xichen looks so confused and it doesn’t sit well with him.

“Of course I have,” he still tries. “How couldn’t I?”

The leader still looks so lost it hurts to look at.

“Or the second jade, Lan Wangji!”

That apparently isn’t the best thing to say because Lan Xichen goes from confused to something that appears to be heartbroken and it sends a flare of panic down Wei Wuxian’s spine because why would he react like that?

“You have heard about Wangji?” he asks, the next part adding it almost too low to hear. “Recently?”

“Yes, it’s quite famous.”

“Senior Mo, I understand your hesitation, but we can assure you there won’t be a problem,” Lan Sizhui intervenes when Lan Xichen just stares at him. “Your help would be invaluable.”

And Wei Wuxian wants to say no, to stay away from everything where the risk of being recognised exists, but the seed of confusion and worry has been planted and he wants to understand why something so apparently innocent is causing this kind of reaction. He’s suddenly desperate to know what's going on.

“Fine, but don’t get high expectations.”

The trip towards the Cloud Recesses is nerve-racking.

Because of Wei Wuxian’s lack of weapons, they are forced to travel by foot and that just extends the number of days they need to reach the place. Wei Wuxian does his best to keep his act up of being a lunatic who isn’t worried about anything in the world when he feels the anxiousness is consuming him from the inside and hopes he succeeds.

On his way he sees Lan Sizhui travelling close to the leader, only leaving his side when he comes back to check on Wei Wuxian and the rest of his group. In fact, right before Wei Wuxian accepted going with them, the junior and leader separated from the rest and came back after a while. Lan Xichen thanked him properly and smiled, but it was worth noting that said smile didn’t reach his eyes.

Wei Wuxian tries to come up with as many theories as he can that explain why Lan Xichen would react like that at the mention of Lan Qiren and Lan Wangji, but they become so fatalistic he ends up pushing everything away and instead focuses on reading himself for the inevitable encounter.

“Your mount can stay in the back of the mountain,” Lan Xichen informs them when they stop at the entrance. “I can assure you it will be tended to and properly taken care of.”

“Hope you have apples to spare, he only moves when he’s offered some,” he chuckles, patting the donkey’s back. “Oh, and green grass only.”

“Of course we have green grass,” Lan Jingyi mutters. “The bunnies in there are happy.”

The mention of bunnies has Wei Wuxian remembering the small balls of white fur that left the cave after Lan Yi trusted the piece of Yin Iron to him and Lan Zhan. He remembers teasing the man about cooking them only to be told he was going to keep them.

To think he really did.

Climbing up the long set of stairs, Wei Wuxian is reminded for the millionth time of Lan Wangji and everything that happened between them in different places. He remembers the first time they met, their small fight, Wei Wuxian's shameless teasing and Lan Zhan's hilarious reactions, being pulled into the cave to find Lan Yi, being punished and having to write the rules at the library under the watchful eye of the other. A small smile ends up appearing on his face as he looks up to find the rules he had to write, only to stop because—

"I was sure there were more rules," he says, staring at the list he can swear is shorter.

"There used to be more, you are correct," Lan Xichen says with a nod, glancing at the rock. "Things have changed, Young Master Mo."

The *why* remains stuck inside his throat. He can't bring himself to directly question what is going on and why so many things have changed because it wouldn't make sense. The least he wants is to be pulled away now that he *needs* to know what is going on. Shaking his head for the millionth time he looks away and starts to move to follow the leader, only to almost trip when a kid runs past him while being chased by another.

"I thought running was forbidden and—"

"Kids will be kids," Lan Xichen chuckles softly, completely unaffected by it as he continues his way towards the main hall.

"Ah, yeah, kids in the end..."

At the main hall, Wei Wuxian is offered food and some time to rest while Lan Xichen takes the sword to the Mingshi so they can start with the preparations to deal with it. Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui stay behind with him while the rest of the disciples are dismissed and told to write a report about what happened.

"What do people even say about our sect? You have such weird ideas," Lan Jingyi mutters while Wei Wuxian stares at the food in front of him.

"I don't know, just things I heard," he answers with a vague movement of his hand. "Seems they were wrong, though."

"Of course they are!" Jingyi argues again, crossing his arms. "What kind of unreasonable nonsense is all that you said?"

"In other's defence, things could have changed," he tries, throwing the idea in hopes of getting some answers. "You're probably too young to remember or notice."

"Things did change," Lan Sizhui replies calmly. "But you are right, Senior Mo, we were too young to fully comprehend."

"Sounds drastic," he comments, poking his food. "Can't help but wonder why."

Lan Sizhui's eyes move down, an expression he can't fully understand because he doesn't know him that well but that gives the impression of being in pain, appearing on his face.

It is safe to assume the subject is a sensitive one and even when Wei Wuxian wants to ask if he's alright or if he said something wrong, he goes against it and even goes against making another comment. As Lan Jingyi pointed out, the only way Mo Xuanyu has to get information about what happens in Gusu is through people's comments. Unlike Wei Wuxian, he was never here and of course, never witnessed that things really are different from how they were.

After some time Lan Xichen appears again and announces everything is ready for them to start but gives Wei Wuxian the option of resting a bit more before starting. Wei Wuxian politely declines.

At the Mingshi, he finds some elders already prepared to start with the ritual and the sword placed in the middle with protections that assure it won't be lashing out at everyone in there so what happened back at Mo Village happens again. Wei Wuxian is expecting to receive disdainful looks or something that leaves it clear he isn't welcomed here, but to his surprise, they don't even seem to mind him.

Sure, they look at Lan Xichen with an incredulous look, but they don't say anything and it says a lot.

"I noticed you rushed to create a new flute," Before they start, Lan Xichen says. "Feel free to use this one."

The dizi he offers is white, unlike his own Chenqing, smooth, cold to the touch and with a small blue tassel hanging from the end. It's clear it isn't of Liebing's quality, but it doesn't seem to be the type disciples would use to practise. Wei Wuxian has the feeling that he has seen that tassel before, but is incapable of remembering so he just takes it.

"Will take care of it," he hums. "Promise to give it back soon."

"There's no need," the man says with a shake of his head. "It's yours to keep..."

There's something else in the way he eyes the flute and something in the way his last words are almost whispered, but Wei Wuxian decides not to think about it. The leader is, for the millionth time, nice and wants to do something that will eventually help everyone in the long term.

"Thank you, Zewu-jun."

As Wei Wuxian noted back at Mo Village, the spirit they are dealing with is stronger than a lot of things they have seen. He can feel the resentment and anger swarming around, fueled by so much anger it makes him think this is the spirit of a Wen who died during the Sunshot Campaign. By the time they manage to subdue it and force it to cooperate with them, it's only Lan Xichen and him, the xiao and dizi working in harmony to eventually win.

It reminds Wei Wuxian of how well his dizi worked with the zither.

"It's clear it wants to lead us somewhere," the leader comments as he eyes the sword.

"Maybe the answers are there."

“I have the same idea,” he says, flicking the edge of the sword to see it sway before returning to point in the same direction. “Since you’re very busy, I offer myself to go.”

The offer is unexpected and it’s even more when he takes into consideration how much they had to beg him to come, but he’s losing his mind and can’t stand being here any longer. A part of him wants to run around the Cloud Recesses until he finds Lan Wangji because, by this time, it is impossible that the other hasn’t heard that the leader, his brother, brought someone who behaves shamelessly and wears a mask as if he is nothing more than a lunatic.

So why isn’t he here?

A part of him reminds him that the man moved on and has no reason to investigate who he is, another part says he is away on a night hunt or tending to something important and the third part... he doesn’t want to think about it.

“Are you sure, Young Master Mo?”

“Of course!”

“Alright then... Please feel free to send as many letters as you see fit.”

Despite his reticence, Lan Sizhui gives him a sack with money courtesy of the leader the next morning and when he’s about to leave with his donkey. The young one wishes him a safe trip and asks him to stay safe, once more thanking him for his help back at Mo Village.

The trip is a long one and despite being used to long trips, the more time passes the more Wei Wuxian starts to feel the loneliness creeping up inside of him.

By the end of his previous life, he had the Wen Remnants and before everything fell he had Jiang Cheng, Jiang Yanli, Nie Huaisang and the disciples from Yunmeng. Right now he feels he has no one and even when he tries to reason this is the consequence of his own actions, he can’t shake the feeling off.

Even when he didn’t want to face a lot of people from his past, why can’t he find Lan Wangji?

He tries to reason that the man probably wasn’t there. Lan Wangji surely is the same powerful cultivator he was before and because of that he needs to travel around helping people, so his absence makes sense... but he can’t fully convince himself. There’s a voice in the back of his mind telling him that there is something else, something he can’t really see even when it is right in front of him and it causes the same ugly feeling from before.

In the end, he’s not brave enough to look for an answer.

In the town near Qinghe, he discovers there’s a rumour about a group of buildings *eating* people and how that has kept others from going in there. It isn’t hard to deduce these stone castles have something important inside and the convenient disappearance of the robbers that started the rumour has been used by the Qinghe Nie sect to further ensure no one gets around.

He also discovers Nie Mingjue has been dead for a long time now and that Nie Huaisang has turned the sect into a laughable one and he's not sure how to feel about it.

Despite everything, it brings him no joy to know that people who turned their backs on him are either dead or suffering. Unlike what people believed, he is not a blood-thirsty demon who wants to kill people or someone who is driven by the need for revenge. Nie Mingjue was blinded by his hatred towards the Wen because of Wen Ruohan's involvement in his father's death and Wei Wuxian really isn't one to judge.

"You again?!"

The enraged voice makes him look away from the crowd to find Jin Ling standing there, his arms crossed over his chest and a frown that reminds him of Jiang Cheng's.

Time to play his part again.

"You think I'm following you?" he asks, resting his hands on his hips. "Your uncle was very clear in saying what will happen and I really don't have a death wish."

"Then why are you here?" he demands to know, Wei Wuxian can't help but wonder what in the world Mo Xuanyu did to have the kid hating him so much.

"Hey, I'm free to go wherever I want!" he says. "I'm just travelling and last I knew that wasn't forbidden!"

Jin Ling looks so flustered it's kind of endearing. Like Jiang Cheng, he seems to get easily infuriated and Wei Wuxian is an expert when it comes to making people reach their limits.

"Just— Just stay away!" he snaps. "Or I will send Fairy after you!"

"Fairy?"

A bark is the only thing he needs to know what that *Fairy* is and it is enough to run as fast as his legs allow him to in the opposite direction.

There's no one to protect him, after all.

In the end, however, he decides to follow Jin Ling from a safe distance. Something in the back of his mind tells him the kid is here to investigate something that may be useful, so he follows until they reach the stone castles the villager talked about.

Jin Ling looks eager to find whatever is hiding behind that place, but after moving around for a while and noticing there is no entrance, he takes the decision of blowing a hole in the wall. Wei Wuxian's protective instincts flare and it only gets worse when that damn dog shows signs of agitation as her master moves closer to the created entrance. Monster or not, the dog surely is capable of sensing if there's something wrong, so he ultimately decides to use one of his *tricks* to lure the kid away, thankfully taking that menace with him.

By the time Jin Ling is back, cultivators from Qinghe are already there so he can only leave with an even bigger scowl.

The Qinghe cultivators look agitated by the situation and despite talking hurriedly, Wei Wuxian can hear they are more worried about sealing it again to *solve the problem* than finding out who did it. That alone says a lot about what is going on there, so when they leave after sealing the entrance with a strong barrier, Wei Wuxian takes the chance to sneak inside.

To his surprise, he finds the place is actually a tomb. Large but dark corridors lead to different rooms where stone coffins are lined up and it makes sense the sword brings him here, he guesses. Still, he is not sure what he is supposed to find... at least it doesn't until he finds out the tombs aren't holding pulverised bones or decaying corpses but swords, sabres to be more specific.

Wei Wuxian understands that somewhere in here there must be something that has to do with the resentful energy stored in the sword found at Mo Village, but knows he can't do much without getting in a lot of trouble and with Jiang Cheng already wanting to kill him, he should be looking to get more problems.

The letter he writes to Lan Xichen contains all the information he got and his theory about needing to find something inside that place that helps with the sword issue. The man was genuinely worried about the issue and seemed equally worried about solving it, so he does want to play his part right and help as much as he can. He doesn't expect, however, to receive a letter from the leader telling him he's heading here and wants him to accompany him to whoever he is planning to do.

Wei Wuxian finds himself remembering Lan Wangji for the millionth time.

Maybe the man finally went back to the Cloud Recesses and is accompanying his brother, maybe this is something bigger than it seems that requires more people. Yes, it must be that, so he spends the time that takes the leader to reach here to take care of Jin Ling and assure he won't be getting into problems by trying to enter that weird place.

Lan Xichen arrives at night and, to his surprise, he comes with Nie Huaisang.

The now leader still has that look full of anxiousness as he hides behind his beautifully decorated fan, but the robes proper of a sect leader give him a slightly different aura. He eyes Wei Wuxian discreetly and stares for a bit longer at the mask he's wearing, but aside from that, only asks Lan Xichen who this *friend* is. Lan Xichen, proper as always, addresses him as Mo Xuanyu and explains his help has been requested by him to deal with an important issue that involves Demonic Cultivation.

Wei Wuxian thinks Nie Huaisang will be surprised to hear this, to hear the proper leader looked for someone with such a questionable reputation, but he's not, he just nods and acts as if it is the most normal thing in the world.

It is confusing.

"My ancestors will hate me for disrespecting them like this."

After a quick conversation, Nie Huaisang allows them to go inside the castles to investigate things better and even when he doesn't look precisely happy to have them discover they use

corpses to entertain the spirits of the sabres, he doesn't seem to have another choice.

"I apologise, Huaisang, my only wish is to solve this issue," Lan Xichen says calmly, keeping an eye on the reaction the sword has with each corpse. "We're trying to be as respectful as we can, as well."

"Yeah I get that..." he sighs in defeat. "Xichen-ge, you're always dealing with so many things."

"Not at all," Lan Xichen replies with a light chuckle. "I'm afraid it is not enough."

The Lan Sect had always been a righteous one and had always tried to help whenever they can, but the conversation those two are having makes Wei Wuxian feel something weird inside. The Sunshot Campaign ended way before he died and he doubts another war happened, Jin Guangshan had one-half of his seal and that was more than enough to sate his greed. Why was Lan Xichen always busy? More importantly, why does the leader think it's not enough?

Not that he has the right to ask, of course.

After more time of moving around trying to find something, the sword finally reacts to the energy and points in a new direction. Nie Huaisang eyes it curiously but doesn't ask, so when Lan Xichen thanks him for his cooperation and apologises for the problems caused, he lets them go without asking anything else.

"So this has to do with the Qinghe Nie sect... I can say I didn't see it coming," he comments as they walk back towards the inn. "Now I wonder where else it will take me."

"Are you... Will you continue helping me?" he asks carefully, surprised but apparently thankful about it.

"Of course, I'm already deep in," he chuckles, trying to brush it off. "And I'm curious about it, the resentful energy is so strong in this one, it's almost unnatural."

Lan Xichen nods, looking away from him. "I'm afraid it is and it isn't something I can't let go, Sizhui and the rest of the juniors would be at risk."

Mentioning Sizhui in a separate way reminds him of his troubling thoughts and all the problems that came for him when he first heard about it. They remind him of Lan Wangji.

"Yeah, it's a problem," he says, trying and probably failing to sound normal. "So I will head that way and send you the information I get."

Lan Xichen nods, still with that calm demeanour but with that *something* that tells him he's not the same Lan Xichen he used to know. They are right outside of their respective rooms, right before separating and something inside Wei Wuxian tells him there won't be a better moment to ask about Lan Wangji, about his brother, about that confusing reaction when he mentioned him.

But he can't.

“I— Well, have a good night, Zewu-jun,” he says, reaching for the handle to slide the door open and flee these embarrassing thoughts. “I will be parting tomorrow morning.”

He doesn't understand why he reacts like this, doesn't understand why he can't ask something so simple, can't understand why it *scares* him so much, but he prefers to avoid it, to let it be until it finally catches up to him... but Lan Xichen doesn't allow it.

“Before continuing with the investigation, I would like to ask you to come to Gusu with me, please.”

Chapter End Notes

HEY, it's me, I'm still alive.

Between work, my brain wanting to edit my old stories so they look good and me feeling down, it took me way longer to finish this chapter. I wanted it to be painful because Wangxian, and wasn't satisfied with how it was going, so after a lot of re-writing and re-watching the series for more pain, here it is... the first part.

As I wrote, this turned into a huuuge monster of several pages and I wasn't even there so, yeah, sorry, but there will be one more part. Fear not, I already wrote it so it will come next week.

Thank you so much for reading, sorry it took me so long, but don't forget to leave me a comment down there!

Wei Wuxian - Part II

Chapter Notes

Welcome to this monstrosity of 20,000+ words.

Friendly reminder that I'm following the events on the untamed, with the obvious changes.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wei Wuxian still can't understand why he said yes.

Seconds ago his main goal was escaping, leaving behind the problems to then be strong enough to deal with it, but there's something that makes him reluctantly accept before finally hiding in his room. His heart is beating erratically, he's breathing harshly and before he knows he's already yanking the mask off his face and throwing it to the side. He doesn't know why he's reacting like this when he's the one who said yes, he doesn't...

No, he's a liar.

He knows he's reacting like this because that's exactly what Lan Wangji used to ask all the time in the past. After seeing him fall from grace and doing the same things he believed Wen Ruohan did, he was desperate to have him back in Gusu, probably hoping to help him set him back on the right path.

Why did he say no every single time?

The trip back to Gusu is mostly silent. The man is nice and makes sure to ask how he is doing and how he is feeling, but he too seems to be submerged in his own thoughts and that keeps him from bringing out other topics. Wei Wuxian is partially glad for this because he's in the same situation and the closer they get to Gusu the more he needs to prepare himself.

"Senior Mo, Zewu-jun, you're back!" Sizhui, unsurprisingly, is who receives them, the young man hurries towards them to take the reins of Little Apple. "I will take him to the back mountain again. I'm glad you made it back safely."

"Thank you, Sizhui, is everything alright?" Lan Xichen asks, with that soft and genuine smile he seems to direct at him and only him.

"Yes, nothing happened," he says with a nod, the same kind of smile appearing on his face. "I'm sure it was a tiring trip, I will allow you to rest."

Wei Wuxian wants to scream, to demand to know what the reason is for having him here, but he knows it's a lost cause. Lan Xichen takes him to a room and apologises for coming up

with this so unexpectedly before thanking him for accepting and informing him they will bring food for him before leaving.

Wei Wuxian barely sleeps.

By now it feels as if everything has caught up on him and he doesn't know how to deal with it. He should be out, finding out what all of this is about, out there looking for Wen Ning and assuring Jiang Yanli's son is safe yet is just sitting here, in the place he was kicked out after breaking most of the rules and wanting to see the person he first annoyed and then came to appreciate but ultimately hurt like he hurt the rest of his family.

"Come on, Lan Zhan, stop hiding," he tries to joke, but soon discovers he can't feel it. "I'm... whatever."

The next day it is until noon that Lan Xichen appears again.

The morning consists of Wei Wuxian trying to force himself to eat, going to check on the wall of rules that indeed has fewer rules and moving around almost wishing to stumble upon Lan Zhan like it happened the very first time they found each other.

The beginning of everything.

"I apologise, Young Master Mo," Lan Xichen says as he guides him to take a seat in the main hall. "I.. got caught up in a couple of things."

"It's fine, I understand," he lies, forcing a smile as the man moves to take his place. "The Cloud Recess has nice scenery."

The man nods with a polite smile, reaching to serve him a cup of tea while Wei Wuxian holds back the urge of snapping and asking why he is here when he is worried about what's going on out there.

"I would like to apologise for my reaction back at Dafan Mountain," he finally starts, his eyes fixed on his cup. "Your words... took me by surprise."

Wei Wuxian notes the suffocating pressure building up inside of him. "It's alright," he lies again, swallowing hard the lump inside his throat. "You don't really owe me an explanation."

He doesn't owe him one, but Wei Wuxian still prays that he gives it to him.

"Of course, but I would like to... understand," he says, finally looking up from his cup. "From my understanding, you were a disciple of the Lanling Jin Sect for some time."

"Yeah, it wasn't *that* long, though," he says, trying to deliver each lie with his same convincing tone. "Things didn't necessarily end well, but that's another story."

Lan Xichen nods slowly, as expected from him he is careful in how he talks and what he says, even when Mo Xuanyu has the reputation of being a lunatic who did a lot of things that

had him kicked out of one of the biggest sects. “I just found it odd that you mentioned Wangji and our uncle...”

The why is stuck in his throat, a part of his mind reminding him of how that would make sense and how it would ruin everything, at the same time, he’s losing his mind. He wants to know, *needs* to know.

“Considering that Wangji has been dead for sixteen years.”

And then, the world seems to stop moving.

Wei Wuxian can no longer hear the noises from outside, can’t feel anything and can’t see anything that isn’t Lan Xichen because it doesn’t make sense. He is sure he heard wrong, sure that he’s making up things because Lan Zhan *can’t* be dead.

“I— I’m sorry,” he says, voice cracking a bit at the end, forcing him to hide it with a small cough. “I can’t believe I missed that.”

Lan Xichen doesn’t reply. The First Jade was always a bit more open with his emotions unlike his brother, but he too was capable of controlling them and would never show what many would consider weakness in front of anyone, but Wei Wuxian can see the pain, the despair that takes over him as he speaks about *this* and that is too much.

He wants to scream, cry and break down because he feels his world is once more falling on top of his head, but he can’t. Mo Xuanyu probably never met Lan Wangji, all the memories of moving around the cultivation world supposedly died with Wei Wuxian all those years ago. Crying doesn’t make sense but—

“I’m sorry, Zewu-jun, don’t want to bring bad memories,” he stutters, pushing himself up despite feeling close to collapsing. “I need to— I will— I apologise.”

“It is alright,” the man says, stopping him right before he can leave. “You can stay, Wei Wuxian.”

Wei Wuxian has never been the emotional type. With how life had treated him since the beginning he preferred to reserve his most vulnerable moments to himself to at least keep others from using them against him. The only times where he had broken this rule was when the emotions were too strong and right now, that's exactly the case.

He can’t even muster the strength to panic at the thought of being discovered. A sob leaves his lips as he presses his hands to his face and feels the despair consuming him. “That can’t be.”

Lan Xichen doesn’t reply again, but he can hear him standing up and moving until he is at his side. His large hand reaches to hold his arm to tug lightly and Wei Wuxian doesn’t have the strength to resist, allowing himself to be guided to an area a bit more secluded from the main hall. Wei Wuxian all but collapses on the seat he’s offered and it isn’t long before he’s ripping the mask off his face and throwing it away in hopes of breathing.

“How— What happened?” he finally manages to ask, looking at the other man who has taken the seat next to him and is staring at the floor.

“Wangji had an infection after... after being punished by his own sect,” he says, his voice trembling. “His weakened body couldn’t fight it off.”

“Punished?” he asks in disbelief. “Why would he be punished? Lan Zhan never did anything wrong, he was— he was the most righteous and good person in this world.”

“He was,” Lan Xichen whispers, bringing one hand to his face to press it against his forehead. “He never did anything wrong, it was us who failed him but he paid for it.”

Anger clashes against his mind-numbing sadness and he can’t keep himself from glaring at the man at his side as he pushes himself off the floor. “What did he do to deserve that kind of punishment? What kind of mistake would be grave enough to—”

He can’t finish.

To his mind comes a very clear image of Lan Wangji looking at him with eyes filled with despair, of the man defending him from whoever tries to reach him despite the colour of their robes, and ultimately holding him so he doesn’t fall. His angered eyes while calling Jiang Cheng and that last scream filled with pain he thought he heard as he fell to the darkness waiting for him

He is the mistake.

A new wave of dizziness hits him and he has to lean on the wall to keep himself from crumbling to the floor. Of course it was because of him. Ever since he appeared in the man’s life everything seemed to become more and more complicated, he got hurt after risking himself for Wei Wuxian’s sake, tried to be there for him when the rest of the world didn’t want him and ultimately defended him on the night where everyone wanted to kill him.

“It was my fault...” he whispers brokenly. “He’s dead because of me.”

“No, it is not.”

Despite the pain and dizziness, Wei Wuxian still looks up after hearing those words. Even when Lan Xichen is nice and kind, he has no reason to be nice to the one who played a huge role in his brother’s death, so he’s ready to debate and ask him to drop the facade because it does nothing for any of them, but he’s incapable after seeing him.

Among the pain, he can see that Lan Xichen is being eaten alive by guilt and that although a bit doubtful, he looks genuine when claiming he doesn’t blame him.

“What?” he asks, the confusion added to his already raging emotions.

“Follow me, please.”

Without waiting for an answer, the man heads for the door and despite feeling weak and at the verge of passing, Wei Wuxian ends up following him. The leader moves around the Cloud

Recesses avoiding the main paths, probably not wanting to be seen, leaving behind the main area to enter the back of the mountain that reminds Wei Wuxian of that time when Lan Wangji came to retrieve him after he decided to investigate the area without asking for permission.

A new sob leaves his mouth when he sees what's in front of him.

"Lan Zhan," he cries, falling to his knees in front of the gravestone, his hands tracing the beautifully engraved name. "Lan Zhan, please... I'm sorry."

He can hear at his side the way Lan Xichen little by little breaks down as well and can hear the quiet sobs that leave his mouth, but he doesn't have the strength to even look his way. The pain is intense, mind-numbing and he can't even think about something that isn't what he's experiencing.

It's even worse than having his core removed while being awake.

Wei Wuxian doesn't want to believe this is happening even when he has the grave in front of him, a childish and stupid part of his mind wants to believe that he's having a nightmare he will wake up from to find Lan Zhan isn't dead but alive and ready to scold him again for messing with Demonic Cultivation. He wants to see his beautiful face once more, wants to hear his voice calling him boring and hear once more how *Wei Ying* sounded when he called for him.

"He was punished because he tried to help me, right?" he asks, turning his reddish eyes to look at the leader who is trying to wipe his tears away.

"Yes," the leader whispers, closing his eyes when Wei Wuxian lets out another pained cry and leans more against the grave. "After your death, several cultivators wanted to go into the palace and Wangji kept them from doing so. It was determined that he needed to be whipped three hundred times."

"What kind of monsters are all of you?" he asks and he doesn't even care what consequences he has to face for saying it. "He made a mistake but he always... he always obeyed, always proved to be the best—he was your direct family!"

"I know!" the man practically yells. "I know and I have been living with regret ever since it happened... If I could go back and force myself to see how stupid I was, I would do it."

The rest of the things he planned to say die in his throat. Who is Wei Wuxian to judge? He was the mistake that led Lan Wangji to die and even when he never asked for it, he knows the man did it out of the pureness of his heart because even when it didn't look like it, Lan Zhan probably cared for him.

Lan Xichen is heartbroken, he was his brother and among the anger and pain, Wei Wuxian can note a certain similarity between both. Lan Xichen lost his brother while thinking he was doing the right thing and Wei Wuxian lost Jiang Yanli while doing the right thing. There's an obvious difference, of course, Wei Wuxian can't even imagine who would think being

whipped so many times is reasonable punishment, but in essence, it's similar and it is clear the man regrets it and has been living with it all these years.

"I have been trying to change everything ever since it happened," the leader continues. "I removed the nonsensical rules that used to make sense while we grew up, got involved and involved the sect in things that weren't as important before. I have been trying to create a world that goes with Wangji's way of seeing things so he no longer is disappointed in me."

Everything suddenly makes so much sense. The shorter list of rules, the way their young disciples are allowed to behave like the kids they are, the acceptance of techniques they used to condemn and the overall normality the sect that used to be so rigid now showed. Wei Wuxian can see the effort the leader put into it and even when the anger is still there, he can say that yes, the man has succeeded and Lan Zhan would be happy to see it.

"I still don't understand why he died," he continues. "Weren't you taking care of him? How could he succumb to infection?"

Lan Xichen's eyes fill with hesitation before he ends up sighing and shaking his head. "Wangji went to the Burial Mounds one last time and he came back with a young kid. He was already weak, the additional strain proved to be too much, even for him."

The mention of a kid has Wei Wuxian's nerves going into overload. He can only think about one kid that would be at the Burial Mounds and although not wanting to admit it, he was sure that he was dead. "A-Yuan?"

The leader sighs once more before nodding. "Young Wen Yuan was sick when Wangji brought him and a fever erased most of his memories from the time he spent at the Burial Mounds. I cannot blame you for not recognising him, he was very young."

Wei Wuxian's mind scrambles until it finally falls on the obvious and logical name. "Lan Sizhui..." he whispers.

He was right.

"We took him as Wangji's adoptive son and I have been raising him," he says, a small smile appearing on his otherwise pained face at the memory of his disciple— no, his nephew. "He's such a strong, capable and kind boy. Wangji would be so proud of him."

A fresh wave of emotions overwhelms Wei Wuxian as he rests his forehead on the cold stone, tears falling from his eyes as he is torn between being happy to know sweet A-Yuan is alive and devastated about Lan Zhan's death.

"He's so kind, sweet and smart, didn't hesitate in defending me back when we first met," he whispers, closing his eyes as he wraps his arms around himself. "Lan Zhan fell in love with the kid, of course he was going to save him."

Lan Xichen allows him to cry, suffer and feel everything he needs to feel and it isn't long before he ends up kneeling on one side of the gravestone. He's crying as well and every now

and then says something he can't understand. Wei Wuxian can feel his pain and he is sure the leader is capable of feeling his own.

"I do not blame you because you, just like Wangji, were a victim," the leader says after a moment, his words making him snap his head up to look at him. "I could have done something after he returned from Yiling, could have done something when he was being whipped but didn't. The only ones to blame are me and our sect."

"It's me who caused all of it, it was my fault as well."

"You were the only one who stood up for innocent people," he whispers. "And Wangji was the only one who understood you... I will forever regret not supporting him and having to live without him is my punishment, but you are back and I won't turn my back on you again."

Amidst the pain, Wei Wuxian can feel those words feel like someone has extended his hand to pull him out of a very dark pit. To have someone. How many times had he wished for someone to say he wasn't alone, that he wasn't wrong and wasn't hallucinating for wanting to protect people who were completely innocent?

It's ironic he rejected the only one who did it in the past.

"I rejected your brother's help all the time," he says, his eyes returning to the gravestone. "He asked me to come back to Gusu with him so many times and I always said no. I was sure he wanted to punish me, to set me back on the rightful path... it felt like an insult to the stupid man I was at that time."

"He never wanted to punish you, he cared about you and was worried about the damage that practice could do to you," Lan Xichen explains and Wei Wuxian doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. "He wasn't sure how to show it but... you were very important to him."

Wei Wuxian can immediately get what hides behind that declaration and he can't deal with the tragedy of it. "Someone so pure, come on, Lan Zhan, you deserved so much better."

How could he be so dumb?

Sure, he knew the man didn't fully hate him as much as he initially thought, but from there to even think he could be... in love with him. How couldn't he notice? Was he that oblivious?

"I never wanted anyone to get hurt," he whispers, rubbing his eyes harshly with his hand. "Turns out that's what I did more. Jin Ling, his parents, Jiang Cheng and now Lan Zhan... I don't even know why I am back."

It is obvious Lan Xichen can't explain it either, but Wei Wuxian appreciates the effort he puts in trying to make him feel a bit better. "Many things that don't have a clear explanation happen... But you're here and I believe there's a purpose."

"So I'm supposed to live this second life without him," he whispers, once more touching the cold stone. "Live knowing he loved me and that I... loved him too but couldn't even realise it

on time.”

“Young Master Wei...”

“I just... need some time,” he whispers, pushing himself off the ground, feeling his legs trembling.

“Of course, feel free to stay here as long as you need,” he offers, standing up as well. “Or... I could reserve a room for you at an inn. I can understand if you don’t wish to be here.”

Staying feels painful, with so many memories waiting to ambush him in every corner and now the constant reminder that he isn’t here anymore, one would need to be a masochist to stay, but at the same time... “Would it be okay if I... I visited his jingshi?”

The man hesitates for a moment, but understanding is quick to fill his eyes as he nods. “Follow me, please.”

There aren’t that many memories of that room, but he feels that’s the only place he can feel everything Lan Wangji was, the only place private enough to hold his essence and the only place that would help him connect with the man.

It isn’t shocking to find the place is well-taken care of as if someone still lived there and came and went at different times. There is no dust, no mountains of fallen leaves or anything that says it has been uninhabited for sixteen years. When Lan Xichen opens the door to let him in, Wei Wuxian does his best to not burst out in tears again because it really feels as if he had moved back in time and Lan Zhan will be there.

His *Wangji* is on the small table in the middle of the room and right next to it rests Bichen, the heavy sword looks clean as well and it breaks Wei Wuxian’s heart to think Lan Xichen has been taking care of everything so it stays the same. He can even smell the sandalwood and it really is like having Lan Zhan there at his side.

“I kept everything as he left it,” the man’s brother whispers. “Someone dared to imply it wasn’t healthy but I don’t really care. It feels right and I don’t have anything else that helps me feel him.”

Wei Wuxian is sure he would do the same.

Kneeling next to the table he imagines the man used every night to read and practice, he imagines Lan Zhan will take his place or call him out for being there. Looking towards the place where the bed is, he can imagine the man will emerge from there looking as flawless, ethereal and beautiful as he had been.

But there is no one.

“I can only imagine how it has been for you,” he says. “No, I actually don’t think I can imagine it.”

“I’m not sure how am I here,” he replies, a dry chuckle leaving his lips. “Well, A-Yuan became my biggest reason, but even with him there were times I felt I couldn’t do it.”

And who can blame him? Wei Wuxian's world started to collapse when he killed Jin Zixuan and the Wen remnants surrendered themselves and it fell on top of his head when he lost Jiang Yanli. At that time he could have clung to Lan Zhan's efforts to save him to stay alive, but not even that was enough.

"I'm glad you did it," he continues, caressing the heavy sword that still is cold to the touch. "A kid shouldn't lose everyone he loves that many times."

"I hope he can remember Wangji on his own one day," he says, voice trembling lightly. "He loves him and calls him father with the most affectionate tone, but I have seen the pain in his eyes when he is incapable of remembering something that happened when he was younger. He's completely innocent, it isn't fair he is suffering."

"When is life fair?" he asks, shaking his head. "I'm not even surprised."

Lan Xichen can't debate that statement, of course.

In the end, Wei Wuxian decides to stay at an inn in Caiyi. His body feels heavy and his head feels as if it is about to explode when he leaves the jingshi and it only worsens when he's finally in the room, causing him to burst into tears for the millionth time.

Even with everything, he can't believe that Lan Zhan is really gone.

He wants to believe it is a lie, believe that the man decided to leave his sect and that's why they decided to paint him as dead, but it doesn't make sense and he knows it. Lan Xichen is genuinely heartbroken, the changes he made are tangible, Bichen and Wangji are there and he even took him to his gravestone.

Lan Zhan is really dead and that is the only truth.

It doesn't make it easy, of course. He throws the covers and pillow off the bed, kicks a table, screams and pulls at his hair so hard he isn't sure how he doesn't rip it off his scalp. Anger, sadness and despair mix violently inside of him as he goes from cursing at anyone who hurt Lan Zhan to begging to have him back.

He doesn't want to continue, he doesn't want to be alone in a world where the only person who believed in him since the beginning is gone. He misses Lan Zhan, the man who took over his mind ever since he found his son and the rest of the juniors in the same place he woke up in...

But he has to do it, right?

After coming to terms with the fact that he was back, he decided to do the best with this new life, to have a purpose, like Lan Xichen said and solving this is possibly his purpose. He's also protecting Jin Ling and A-Yuan.

Lan Zhan would probably be happy, right?

The sword leads him to an isolated town that rumour says it is completely abandoned due to the large number of fierce corpses that roam around. Wei Wuxian deems it as the right place to look for abnormal energies and heads there, finding, to his surprise, Lan Sizhui, Jin Ling, Lan Jingyi, another junior who identifies as Ouyang Zizhen and the rest of the juniors.

“Young Master Mo,” Lan Sizhui calls for him while Lan Jingyi and Jin Ling are arguing about something. “I didn’t know you were coming here.”

It is hard to speak to the kid knowing he is the same one who chewed on his old flute and loved calling him *Xian-gege*, a part of him wants to say something, ask if there’s something that tells him he remembers a bit of that man who dressed in black, but then he remembers what Lan Xichen told him about his sickness and how he can’t remember him and deduces that’s probably better. “I didn’t know *you* were coming. What are you doing here?”

“Felt like we were lured here,” Lan Jingyi replies instead. “Creepy things happened and we ended up here, who knows why he’s here, though.”

“I was also lured here!” Jin Ling hisses, looking close to punching the other. “I don’t need help, I can deal with things on my own.”

“Alright, kids, stop fighting,” he says with a sigh. “You shouldn’t be here, there are corpses and what am I going to do with you if they decide to attack?”

“We can fight!” Jin Ling and Lan Jingyi argue. “We are not kids.”

“You are for me,” he snorts. “Now let’s go, we need to take you out.”

“As if you didn’t have your own weapon,” He hears Jin Ling muttering. “Even you could probably do something.”

Wei Wuxian is about to retort with something smart when he notices that Lan Sizhui is staring at the flute he has hanging from his waist, the white one Lan Xichen gave to him and even when he doesn’t know what is going on, he feels a shiver running down his spine.

There isn’t a lot of time to dwell on it, however, a wave of corpses forces him to push everyone inside an apparently abandoned place where he ends up needing to cook for them after discovering some have been poisoned. Lan Sizhui helps him and Wei Wuxian resists the urge to call him as he used to do it all those years ago, though he confirms that Lan Zhan would indeed be proud of him.

When things escalate, because of course they do, Wei Wuxian finds himself calling for Wen Ning and, to his surprise, he once more appears right on time to fight a fierce corpse he recognises as Song Lan. As if that wasn’t enough, Xue Yang demands to have his help to restore a shattered soul and when Wei Wuxian refuses, he states that he will simply *make* him help.

There's so much he can do with the weak Golden Core Mo Xuanyu managed to forge, not even mentioning he doesn't have a sword, but still, Wei Wuxian refuses to surrender without putting up a fight. The lack of practice is noticeable, but he somehow manages to keep himself mostly safe until Wen Ning manages to win against Song Lan and returns to help him.

Song Lan finishes the job with Xue Yang once the whole truth is out and a mysterious figure arrives in time to take the tally from him and Wei Wuxian can't keep himself from comparing himself to the fallen cultivator. Song Lan lost Xiao Xingchen after making a mistake and while Wei Wuxian never died thinking something was going to happen to Lan Zhan, he too lost him before having the chance of being honest.

Seeing him part with two swords completely alone is like looking at himself.

"Senior Mo... can I talk to you?"

Back at an inn and after writing Lan Xichen yet a new letter with all the information, Wei Wuxian jumps when he hears Lan Sizhui's voice but manages to compose himself. "Sure, what's bothering you?"

"It's not bothering me..." he starts, his eyes falling to the ground as he fumbles with his robes. "I was just wondering about your flute."

Wei Wuxian's heart falls as he looks down at it to take it in his hands. Swallowing hard, he tries to come up with the best thing to say. "It's beautiful, isn't it? Zewu-jun was very generous when giving it to me."

"Oh, he gave it to you?" he asks, looking up at him, somehow looking even more nervous than Wei Wuxian himself. "Yeah, it's beautiful and I— no, it's fine, I'm sorry."

"You haven't done anything wrong, why do you keep apologising?" he hurries to say. "What's in your mind?"

It's the first time he sees the young man hesitating and although not knowing him well, he can see what appears to be shyness appearing in his face. "I... well, uncle— Zewu-jun has a flute he designed for my father and it has his tassel, the one he had on his jade token."

Wei Wuxian's hands tremble slightly as he lifts the flute to look at the tassel. It explains why he had the feeling he had seen it before, it explains why Lan Xichen looked like *that* when he gave it to him and most importantly:

Explains why it was his'.

"I'm sure your father had a great taste," he tries to say, the lump in his throat squeezing it. "But if it is important to you, I can give it back."

"No, it's alright," he says and to his surprise, smiles. "I'm sure uncle has his reasons and I trust his judgement."

Lan Xichen's influence on him is undeniable, but Wei Wuxian can also see things he could clearly see in Lan Wangji and that is heartwarming because it reminds him of that time Lan Wangji bought all the toys the little kid wanted after Wei Wuxian teased him. He would have been a wonderful father and would be proud to see the cultivator he has become.

"I'm sorry, Young Master Wei... I didn't know Hanguang-jun died."

Wei Wuxian can hear Wen Ning's sad tone and is sure he would be close to crying if he was capable of doing it. It had been that night when everyone had already retired that he summoned Wen Ning again to remove the nails he was sure the man also had after he discovered them back with Song Lan.

To have him back like the sentient being he knew is a bit comforting.

"I didn't either," he mutters back. "His brother told me mere days ago and I... it hasn't been easy."

"I'm sorry... wish I could have done something."

"You were locked up over there," He shakes his head. "Don't blame yourself for it."

It infuriates him to know Wen Ning was held captive by Jin Guanshan after the greedy man stated he killed the two siblings along with the rest of their family. Sickens him to know they lied just to keep their status as the most powerful and wealthy sect after the Wen fell and worries him that they kept this secret for so long without anyone noticing it.

"What are you going to do now?" the other asks carefully. "Do you know who is behind this?"

"I'm getting an idea," he sighs, crossing his arms. "But I don't know how Lan Xichen will take it. Last I knew, he and Jin Guangyao were very close and I don't think he will be fine with me accusing him of something."

"I don't think he won't do anything if you prove it to him..." he suggests and yes, it makes sense, but there's one problem.

"I don't really have proof," he says. "I'm putting things together as I go and right now this theory is the one that makes more sense but has nothing to back it off..."

With so many things happening he hasn't really investigated how things are between Lan Xichen and Jin Guangyao. They were and probably still are, sworn brothers, but he can't tell if things are the same as when the other wasn't a sect leader or if they changed. If he brings Nie Mingjue's death into the mix, it gets trickier.

But it needs to be done.

"I will help as much as I can, Young Master Wei."

“You help me by staying and not leaving, Wen Ning.”

Lan Xichen arrives the next day and Wei Wuxian gets to see once more how he checks on his nephew with well-hidden despair in his eyes to then sighs in relief when he makes sure he’s fine. He, of course, checks on the rest of the juniors and promises to investigate the dead cats and noises that seemed to lead them into Yi City to find the culprit, but ultimately tells them to go back home to make sure they are doing well.

Jin Ling, before leaving, begrudgingly says something along the lines of ‘at least you knew what to do with the poison’ that Wei Wuxian decides to take as a thank you and that is more than what he needs.

“I need to be honest with you, Zewu-jun,” he starts when they are finally alone. “But first I would like to ask something... delicate.”

There’s obvious worry on the man’s face, but still nods and apparently tries to ready himself to answer whatever he wants to ask.

“How did Chifeng-zun die?”

“A qi deviation,” he replies once the shock allows him to speak. “It worsened little by little until he suffered a fatal deviation. A-Yuan was around ten when it happened... why?”

“As I mentioned, Xue Yang managed to rebuild half of the seal I created and used it to control the puppets. The resentful energy I followed to Yi City is clearly tainted by this and I can’t think of anyone with that level of hatred than... him.”

Lan Xichen’s face pales. “Mingjue’s?”

“It’s a theory, would need to confirm it by getting near his corpse but—”

“I don’t think that would be possible.”

“I understand your emotions Zewu-jun, but—”

“No, Mingjue’s head went missing and we haven’t been capable of finding it,” he says, rubbing his forehead. “If this has to do with his resentful energy and has been tainted by the tally, then I can only imagine how strong it is.”

“I’m afraid that’s the case,” he says, well, if he had theories, now he’s very close to having facts. “And I suspect... Jin Guangyao could be involved.”

“A-Yao...” The way he whispers the name isn’t a good indication. “Why do you think it has to do with him?”

The fact that he doesn’t outright deny it is a shock.

"I don't have enough proof, but I can't think of more people with that level of power and influence he has," he admits, sighing softly. "Have you noticed something?"

"To be honest we aren't as close as we used to be in the past," he says, closing his eyes as he seems to remember things. "After Wangji's death I became wary of a lot of people and Jin Guangshan was probably the one I trusted less. Given A-Yao's desire to be accepted by him, I put a medium-sized distance between both... when he became a leader after his father's death, the distance was already there and we were both too busy to work on reducing it."

"That's a bit of a shock," Wei Wuxian admits. "But I can understand it."

"Jin Guangshan claimed that ending the Wen, you and keeping your tally was the best choice and all of that led to Wangji's death. I felt lost and couldn't trust anyone... only Mingjue seemed to understand it," he continues, the pain in his face appearing at the mention of both his deceased brother and friend. "When he died it just became worse."

"What about your uncle?" he dares to ask, if he tells him he's dead as well he will probably scream.

"None of us knew how to deal with what happened, out of everything, we never imagined we would be responsible for Wangji's death... he went into seclusion and hasn't been out since then," he sighs. "He has met A-Yuan and has been out for a couple of things, but not entirely. I'm afraid he's not the person you remember."

It sounds impossible. The man was in charge of the sect before Lan Xichen could take the position and handle everything, it feels impossible to have him stepping back... but that's what guilt and pain do to someone.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "Can't imagine how it has been for him as well."

"I'm glad that you can at least find comfort in the fact that you saw Wangji as who he really was, not the idealised idea we had of him."

"I wish that could save me from having so many regrets."

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Going to the conference is as awful as he imagined it would be.

The looks he receives from the vast majority of Jin disciples are filled with disgust and anger, with Qin Su, Jin Guangyao's wife, pretty much running away from him after greeting Lan Xichen. It is more than evident the whole sect knows about whatever Mo Xuanyu did and would love to beat him to death and are only holding themselves back because he is with Lan Xichen at his side.

What hurts most, of course, is facing Jiang Cheng.

His eyes clearly tell that he knows he is Wei Wuxian, that he doesn't fall for the act he keeps putting up to pretend he is the same lunatic they kicked out of the sect. There's anger, resentment and the smallest spark of pain that for moments makes him look as if he will finally bring out Zidian to whip him right in front of everyone, but after greeting Lan Xichen curtly, he walks away.

Wei Wuxian knows Jiang Cheng wasn't really close to Lan Zhan, the two of them were allies during the Sunshot Campaign and later on, merely acquaintances, but even with that, he can't help but wonder what crossed Jiang Cheng's mind when he was told the Second Jade was dead and if that has to do with the fact that he is not actively trying to kill him.

Lan Zhan tried to save him before dying and had been angry when Jiang Cheng came closer to finish him, but he knows the man would never be happy about his death just because of that. If he was incapable of stabbing Wei Wuxian in the face, then he wouldn't be happy with knowing a young cultivator died.

"Er-ge, I'm glad to see you arrived safely," Jin Guanyao greets them with the same niceness the man is so well-known for but is incapable of concealing the wary look that takes over him when he looks at him. "Young Master, welcome."

"I hope you're doing well, A-Yao," Lan Xichen intervenes to drag the attention back to him. "It's never easy to organise this."

They are quick to continue with their conversation and that allows Wei Wuxian to stand back and look around to take in as much information as he can get. Lan Xichen and Jin Guanyao are still on friendly terms despite the Lan leader claiming they aren't as close as before and that's good. Wei Wuxian is starting to feel a bit better about it when he finds someone staring at them with an even more open look of disdain.

"Is everything alright, Young Master Mo?" Lan Xichen asks when he takes his place and he moves closer to him.

"I don't think that person likes us," he says, subtly glancing in the man's direction. "Well, many don't like me here, but for him, it seems to include you."

After a quick glance, Lan Xichen ends up letting out a sigh. "That is Su Minshan, former Gusu Lan disciple, Sect Leader of the Moling Su sect now. He left the sect after... around the time Wangji was taken to Qishan for indoctrination, he played a huge role in what happened back home."

That reminds him that he is also one of the disciples that went with them to the fight with the Waterborne Abyss, the one who lost his sword and then needed the intervention of Wei Wuxian to be saved. That also reminds him of Lan Zhan and how it had been one of the first times he touched him.

A touch he will never feel again.

"The nerve he has to be mad at you, then," he says, crossing his arms as he looks back to the front. "How could he establish a sect?"

“He took many of our teachings to use them as his and people followed him,” he replies tiredly. “I don’t mean to judge, but A-Yao also supported him a lot. In return, he is devoted to him.”

That rings something inside Wei Wuxian that makes him squint. The identity of the man who took half of the tally from a dying Xue Yang could be Jin Guangyao, but given the man’s weak core, performing such a consuming technique could leave him tired and that doesn’t seem to be the case. Maybe this Su Minshan could be the one helping him.

Their plan isn’t easy and the percentage of failure is way bigger than the winning one, but Wei Wuxian knows it’s the only chance he has to reach the end of this. Taking advantage of the fact that Lan Xichen is still on amicable terms with Jin Guangyao, he will distract him while Wei Wuxian uses his paperman technique to slip inside the private chambers of the leader to find something, anything basically, that helps them solve this issue.

With the formalities done, Lan Xichen and Wei Wuxian are given adjacent rooms and they decide to wait for a moment before the man comes to Wei Wuxian’s one to finish arranging the last details. He is obviously worried about his safety, so gives him fifteen, twenty at most, minutes before coming back to pull him out.

It is scary to be all by himself, but Wei Wuxian knows that’s how it will be.

Following Lan Xichen’s instructions, Wei Wuxian locates Jin Guangyao’s room and there finds the leader having a heated discussion with his wife, who sounds very distressed and disgusted until there’s a knock on the door and a voice informs him that Lan Xichen is looking for him. Wei Wuxian sees the man taking his now dazed-looking wife to another room using a mirror and even when it is risky, he moves behind them. Qin Su is placed on a chair and the man tells her something before hurriedly leaving.

It becomes obvious this is his treasure room, with scrolls, daggers and many other collectables the Jin had snatched for themselves through the years and it makes Wei Wuxian hopeful of finding something.

Despite noting Qin Su is mostly incapable of moving, he carefully moves around examining the different things, checking the scrolls and books that some contain poetry and short stories while others, to his surprise, have a clear depiction of what he worked at in the Burial Mounds. Rituals and talismans he modified and created during those times are here, in possession of the sect that ruined everything back then. It makes him sick.

He remembers Lan Xichen telling him Lan Wangji was punished because he kept people from entering the palace he worked at, so to think they ended up doing it anyway makes him feel as if Lan Zhan’s death was for nothing.

Further in, he finds an unlabelled book that contains an unnamed melody. It doesn’t look like the kind he remembers seeing back in Gusu, it looks more like something someone scribbled as they composed it to not forget it later on. It could be unimportant, but Wei Wuxian decides to learn it to then ask Lan Xichen about it.

Suibian is also there.

He doesn't know how they got it and his mind is still reeling after finding the rest of the things, but to see his sword, the one he could no longer wield after losing his core, sitting there as a trophy the Jin kept after ruining his life makes the anger and resentment flare inside of him.

Just how despicable they could be?

"Young Master Wei, are you alright?"

Wei Wuxian wasn't aware of his own expression once back in his own body, so to hear it isn't the composed one he hoped to have as he returned is a bit of a shock. Still, he does his best to put his thoughts in order to properly explain.

"So many things," he whispers, closing his eyes while holding his head. "My sword is there, Qin Su is there, an unnamed melody is there and... Nie Mingjue's head is also there."

Even without looking at him, he can exactly tell how it is for the leader. He has experienced the sensation of having everything collapsing on top of him in both lives, but it's still hard to see it happening to someone else.

Lan Xichen collapses to the floor, his arms barely keeping him from falling all the way down. His eyes are staring at the floor while his breathing little by little quickens, a small but noticeable tremor running down his body. "How... how could I miss it?"

"You said it yourself, Zewu-jun, you weren't as close as you used to be and... the Jin have always been like that," he offers even when he knows it isn't comforting at all. "It just hasn't changed."

"No, it shouldn't be like this."

From one moment to the other the man is standing up and hurrying for the door so Wei Wuxian is quick to follow, forgetting the mask on the table. The least he wants is to have the leader get hurt for making some reckless decision, so even if he is who normally makes said decisions, he walks hurriedly.

To Wei Wuxian's surprise, Jin Guangyao is already outside of his room with some disciples, Su Minshan, Jin Ling and a few other sect leaders from minor sects. His eyes are immediately drawn towards Lan Xichen who is already close and even dares to plaster that amicable smile even when Lan Xichen's expression can't mean anything good.

"Er-ge, is everything alright?" he asks, but before he can continue, a frown appears on his face as his eyes fall on Wei Wuxian. "So the rumours were true."

"The ones who talked about me or the ones who talked about you?" Wei Wuxian asks, knowing it's too late to back away. "Can't help but think we are quite popular."

"Such shameless and despicable behaviour, as expected from the Yiling Patriarch," Su Minshan accuses, glaring at him. "Can't help but question why someone like Sect Leader Lan would be with you."

“I wish to speak to you, Sect Leader Jin,” Lan Xichen, completely unbothered by the other, continues. “There are some things I can’t overlook.”

There’s nothing beyond the initial surprise on Jin Guangyao’s face. In his typical way of acting, he remains calm, calculating everything he does. “I’m afraid I can’t overlook his presence, however.”

The disciples, who were between shocked and worried about Wei Wuxian’s appearance, move after hearing their leader, unsheathing their swords and pointing at them without even doubting. Wei Wuxian knows he and Lan Xichen are at a clear disadvantage and still don’t know what the leader had in mind when he left the room to look for his sworn brother, but if he has to fight, then he will do it.

For him, for Lan Zhan and for the innocent ones.

“If you want to handle it this way, then it’s alright,” Lan Xichen says, once more looking unaffected by what’s going on. “Explain to me why is Wen Ning alive, please.”

The mention of who everyone knew as the Ghost General has the disciples taking a hesitant step back while Su She, Sect Leader Ouyang and Yao, look at Jin Guangyao who is still standing still, mimicking the calmness of his sworn brother. “The Ghost General?”

“How can you believe what he claims to see?” Sect Leader Ouyang says, pointing at Wei Wuxian. “He will obviously use anything to damage the respectable cultivators.”

“It’s not something he told me,” Lan Xichen says, his eyes looking at the older leader. “It is something my own nephew and disciples saw. I believe your own son can tell you about it as well.”

“The Yiling Patriarch surely brought him back,” Su She says once the other leader is incapable of saying anything else.

“I can’t bring back something that doesn’t leave a corpse,” he says this time. “Your father said they were burnt, I don’t think that really was the case.”

“What are you trying to imply?” Su She demands. “Lianfang-zun is a respectable leader!”

“Sect Leader Jin, why is Wen Ning still alive?” Lan Xichen asks again, ignoring the rest of the comments. “Without implications or speculations, I just wish to know the truth.”

“If it was in my knowledge that he still lived, I would have done something,” Jin Guangyao finally says. “We put a lot of effort in keeping things under control, but as you may know, there are things that manage to escape.”

“Like Xue Yang reforging the other half of the tally?” Wei Wuxian asks. “Part that mysteriously vanished, by the way before he died.”

“Then it is possible many more things could be hiding as well,” Lan Xichen sentences. “Like hiding Mingjue’s head.”

There's a collective gasp coming from the other leaders, Jin Ling freezes, Su She glares and the disciples seem close to attacking at the implication of having them insult their leader. Jin Guangyao looks mostly composed, but there's a clear sign that says he wasn't really expecting that.

"That is a grave accusation," he replies, straightening his back a bit more. "I assume the information was given by the Yiling Patriarch?"

"Not long ago my disciples found a sword that possessed an unnatural amount of resentful energy, it led us to different places where said resentful energy was consuming everything," Lan Xichen starts. "I can only think of one person who would have that amount of resentful energy after death. We both know Mingjue can't be put to rest as long as his body is still disturbed."

"That is a ridiculous and grave accusation," Sect Leader Yao says. "Why don't you go and check? This could have an easy solution."

"It's a grave violation to access the treasure chambers of a sect leader," Jin Guangyao says, his niceness little by little going away despite talking with his sworn brother.

"It's also a grave act to raise a sword against a sect leader who is an ally, but I think we're beyond that," the Lan leader says. "I never mentioned anything about your treasure chamber."

Understanding he made a mistake falls heavily on Jin Guangyao and Wei Wuxian can clearly see it despite his efforts to hide it. His eyes dart to the side to eye his disciples and then back to them in a clear display of anxiousness. "Lower your weapons, Er-ge is right, we are reasonable people."

Despite hesitating, they eventually do, taking yet another step back.

"With this information, I believe it is safe to say there are several things we need to tend to," Lan Xichen states. "Sect Leader Jin, how are we going to proceed?"

"I ask for a couple of days, my wife is feeling unwell and my main priority is tending to her," Jin Guangyao says once he's back in control. "I still believe what I'm being accused of is unreasonable, but the quicker things are solved, the better we can return to our important issues."

"I will come back in two days," Lan Xichen states, glancing back at Wei Wuxian before starting to move.

As Wei Wuxian follows, he can hear the rest of the leaders muttering something disdainful towards him while Jin Guangyao eyes him with barely contained distrust and anger. He can only imagine how it is for the man to let him go now that he is sure he is Wei Wuxian, the former Yiling Patriarch, one of the biggest enemies the Lanling Jin Sect had.

What hurts him, however, is seeing Jin Ling's expression of pure heartbreak.

The trip back to Gusu once more happens in complete silence.

At first, Wei Wuxian wants to thank the leader for standing up for him and for not doubting what he saw back there, he wants to discuss the plan he has in mind for when they come back, but all the ideas are left behind when he notices just how badly the leader is doing.

Despite showing complete control of his emotions and the situation, now that Carp Tower is being left behind, Lan Xichen little by little shows just how badly this is affecting him. The cracks in the protective shield he used for himself are cracking and the more they move the more those cracks get larger, extending until they finally break.

By the time they reach the Cloud Recesses, Lan Xichen looks close to passing out. He is incapable of keeping his hands from shaking and is barely capable of regulating his breath enough to not gasp for air.

“Uncle!” Lan Sizhui, to no one’s surprise, hurries to reach them, his hands reaching for his arm. “Uncle, are you alright?”

“I need a moment, A-Yuan,” the leader replies, still having the strength to give his hand a small squeeze. “Please take him to a room so he can rest.”

Lan Sizhui looks worried, but even with that nods and just makes sure his uncle is doing fine as he walks away before turning to look at him. His smile is a bit tight, still genuine, but with the obvious worry of seeing the other causes. Wei Wuxian wants to say he doesn’t have to so he can follow the leader but knows he won’t really do it so just hurries to follow him and convinces him of leaving by saying he’s fine.

Even when he’s not.

As he lies in bed, he can’t get rid of the image of Nie Mingjue’s head sitting on one of the tables as if it was just another collectable, can’t forget about the talismans and books filled with his investigations that were taken out of the place he lived in during his last days and can’t forget about his sword, the one he was so proud of having and how it ended in the hands of the people who ruined his life.

Maybe what hurts him more is thinking about how they ended up here.

Wei Wuxian feels he can see Lan Zhan guarding the entrance to the palace, keeping those auto-proclaimed righteous cultivators from going in because he *was* that good and then being punished because of it. Lan Wangji could understand Wei Wuxian better than he could understand himself and even when he saw Wei Wuxian letting himself fall to his death, he couldn’t stand having them disrespecting what was his last home.

He loved him after all.

And now the Jin are behind the problems once more. They kept Wen Ning chained and locked up somewhere in Carp Tower, drilled nails into his skull in hopes of controlling him

and kept it hidden from everyone and who knows what else.

He tries to find comfort in the thought that he is not alone and that even when it hurts Lan Xichen to know his sworn brother is behind this mess, he is willing to help and reach the end of it, and it works, but only to a certain extent. As he curls up on the bed, he can't shut the voices that remind him that Lan Wangji, his Lan Zhan, won't be back once he reaches the end.

There will be no one that calls him *Wei Ying* with that unique tone because uncovering Jin Guangyao's lies won't bring Lan Wangji back to life. Just like it happened with the Sunshot Campaign, things won't end with their victory, as soon as it goes down the rest will come.

It's like a nightmare inside a nightmare.

The news of the Yiling Patriarch being back reach the Cloud Recesses the next day.

Wei Wuxian's head is throbbing that morning as he walks towards the main hall in hopes of finding the leader, but even with that, he stops when he hears a conversation between two disciples who are ahead of him.

"So it is confirmed, Wei Wuxian is back," one says. "He is who Zewu-jun brought."

"He surely has his reasons," the other answers with a shrug. "I'm more worried about what's going on with the Jin sect."

"It's a mess, who knows what will happen."

He doesn't hear the rest of the conversation because he can't really focus. They don't sound worried or scandalised about his presence, they don't even seem to care and it's just a new layer of confusion. He is the Yiling Patriarch, he is Wei Wuxian, the vilest being that needed to be annihilated, so why are they so calm about it?

He knows many things are different for the Lan Sect, knows Lan Xichen actively changed things so Lan Zhan's memory wasn't disrespected but to see how far it reached makes him feel dizzy. His head throbs more violently as he once more forces himself to continue walking, almost reaching the main hall when both Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi appear.

"The kids are here," he says, clearing his throat in hopes of masking his troubling emotions.

"We're not kids!" Lan Jingyi argues once more. "What's with you?"

"Are you alright... Senior Wei?"

It's just a second of hesitation, but Wei Wuxian clings to that because it's easier to handle the world hating him than having people not caring about his reappearance. "You don't have to be around me if you don't want to, you know? I know my reputation precedes me."

“Stop with your weird ideas,” Lan Jingyi says with a snort. “What does that have to do with what we’re asking?”

“I apologise, didn’t mean to be rude,” Lan Sizhui hurries to say, stopping his friend by raising his hand. “It’s just... When we first met, we didn’t expect you would indeed be Wei Wuxian.”

“Shouldn’t you be afraid?”

“Why would we?” Lan Jingyi questions again. “Unless you became a bloodthirsty monster, there’s no reason to fear you.”

It is weird to hear them using the description the cultivation world used whenever they felt like listing his crimes in his previous life. “What were you taught about me?”

It’s obvious they weren’t expecting that question, but Wei Wuxian is beyond that. He needs to know, needs to have another piece that fills the huge puzzle this new world is for him.

“Well, that you were a rebel, basically,” Lan Jingyi replies first. “One keen on breaking rules.”

“You were also the only one who stood up for the Wen remnants who were mostly elders and non-cultivators,” Lan Sizhui says, his expression a bit more serious. “You weren’t wrong in many things and Father believed it was the right thing as well...”

The mention of Lan Wangji has the same effect it has on Lan Xichen. There’s sadness in the kid’s eyes, grief and that sense of being lost because he can’t remember him on his own.

“We also use some of the things you developed,” he continues after recovering a bit. “The compass, the spirit-attraction flags and other things we use on our night hunts. We were taught differently and that has allowed us to understand.”

“So that means the others hate me,” he says, feeling that weird sense of familiarity. “Can’t say it surprises me.”

“It depends on the sect,” Lan Sizhui nods with a sigh. “The Lanling Jin are openly against the Wen and, well, you, the Yunmeng Jiang are mostly distant, they aren’t actively promoting things against you, but they aren’t defending you either.”

Well, it explains why Jiang Cheng didn’t kill him and why Jin Ling looked so heartbroken at finding his real identity.

“The rest of the minor sects just follow the big one they prefer,” Lan Jingyi shrugs. “Who cares what others think, though? It’s not that we ask for permission.”

“Yeah... guess you’re right,” he whispers. “I just... I was not nor am a hero, I was just being true to myself.”

“We get that, it isn’t confusing for us,” the other disciple says with a nod, still eyeing him as if he is indeed a lunatic. “Sizhui, we need to finish the report.”

The young Lan Yuan nods and is about to turn around before he looks back at him. "I'll be there in a minute."

Lan Jingyi looks confused by the sudden change, but after a couple of seconds shrugs and nods, turning around to start walking. At this point, he's not surprised that he doesn't look worried about leaving his friend behind.

"Senior Wei I... would like to ask you something," he starts, that look of embarrassment returning to him. "If that's alright with you, of course."

"Nothing has changed," he says despite the anxiousness that starts to steadily climb up. "You can ask anything you want."

Lan Sizhui once more nods, this time gripping his sleeves for several seconds before he ends up sighing and rubbing his arms. "You knew my father...right?"

"Yes, I did," he replies, feeling that horrid lump forming inside his throat. "Lan Zhan and I went through a lot of things together."

"Uncle said you were close," he says, a sad smile appearing on his face. "I just... I'm sorry you lost him as well."

"Thank you," he whispers, trying his best to not break down in front of the kid as he did in front of Lan Xichen. "I have the feeling he would be proud of you."

Tears fill Lan Sizhui's eyes but among that sadness, he can see he is proud, happy to receive those words from someone that knew his father. Wei Wuxian realises the young man reminds him of his younger self whenever Jiang Fengmian told him his parents were strong and capable while knowing Wei Wuxian couldn't really remember much about them.

Just like what happened with Lan Zhan, he seems to have a connection with his son.

Before leaving, the young man tells him his uncle isn't doing that well and is still in the hanshi but doesn't doubt he will be meeting him before the day ends. Lan Sizhui reminds him he can have breakfast, spends his time at the library or wherever he wants to be, giving him the freedom to do whatever he wants to do in the place he was kicked out from all those years ago.

Once alone, Wei Wuxian is obviously worried about the leader and considers going to check on him, but soon understands that he can't really do anything. As much as they have bonded over the pain and the current situation, the leader probably needs to be alone to deal with his own things, and it's not that the former Yiling Patriarch knows how to comfort him or people in general.

The Cloud Recesses haven't really changed much.

The buildings he knows were burnt during Wen Xu's attack had been rebuilt to look like the ones that existed before, the Cold Springs still has the clearest water and the library possesses

the biggest collection Wei Wuxian has seen and he's glad they managed to recover most of the books.

Without even wanting, he realises he can see Lan Zhan in every corner.

Memories of him annoying the life out of the others appear as he walks around, when he enters the library he can see the tall man sitting in that perfect way while a young version of himself whines and pouts because he needs to copy the rules. He can see both of them standing in the waters of the Cold Springs, seconds before they are both dragged to that cold cave where Lan Yi and the bunnies lived for a long time. Can see both sparing while Wei Wuxian does his best to keep the bottles with Emperor's Smile safe and can even see both receiving their punishment for drinking but that one quickly turns bitter. He wasn't there when Lan Zhan was punished, but he can imagine how he looked while getting hit three hundred times, can imagine how his back turned into a bloody mess with broken skin and tainted clothes.

He wants him back, wants him to be here, desperately wishes he could bring him back and the impulse becomes so strong he imagines how the man would look now that he is an adult. He imagines they would be of similar heights but with Lan Zhan being a bit taller, tries to recreate those beautiful golden eyes, long hair and even more defined muscles. His level of cultivation would keep him looking almost like before, but he still tries to imagine those small details that would make him look more mature and more like the adult he should be. It hurts, of course, anger and pain are quick to fill him once more but he still continues doing it because he misses him and—

“So the rumours were true.”

The voice catches him by surprise, making him stumble with a rock and almost fall face to the floor. His heart is beating widely inside his chest as he turns to face the owner, his heart falling when his eyes fall on *him*.

He already heard from Lan Xichen that Lan Qiren wasn't the same he remembered, but to see it is a whole new thing. The man looks older than he is, with sunken eyes, bony hands and an unnatural paleness that gives him the appearance of a ghost currently haunting the Cloud Recesses. That strict and uptight appearance is pretty much gone, sadness and badly-handled grief had seized him and hasn't let go in all these years.

“Grandmaster Lan,” he whispers, trying and failing to not just stare like an idiot. “I— you heard about me.”

“It's the only thing everyone is talking about,” he replies, even his voice sounds as if he's exhausted. “You are back.”

“Yes,” he replies, frowning as he tries to come up with something. “Someone brought me back.”

“I assume you already know what happened,” he continues, not really looking at him. “With Wangji and everyone else.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he says even when there’s this voice at the back of his head telling him the man is responsible for it as well. “Zewu-jun explained everything to me.”

The man doesn’t look surprised or betrayed by the information, it is as if he is incapable of feeling something that it’s not his pain and grief. “Have you returned to deal with everything?”

“With the current mess, yes,” he replies, looking away. “I think Lan Zhan would have liked that... A stable and peaceful world is what he would have liked for Sizhui.”

The mention of his nephew’s adoptive son somehow makes him look even more miserable. “He’s a capable cultivator and remarkable person. Worthy of being Wangji’s son.”

Wei Wuxian can only nod. He was never Lan Qiren’s favourite and the fact that he was kicked out of the Cloud Recesses said a lot. The man hated him then and probably hates him more now. Even if Lan Xichen says he is a victim as well, he is sure someone thinks Wei Wuxian is the one to blame and Lan Qiren is surely that person—

“I’m sorry you came back to a world where he is not here,” the man says, abruptly stopping his train of thought. “I never wanted this, but that’s what happened and nothing will change it.”

“Lan Zhan wouldn’t want you to think like that,” he says immediately despite thinking he didn’t have the right to do so. “He wasn’t like that.”

“I didn’t stop,” Lan Qiren replies as if he’s unaffected by what he said. “I knew it was too much, I heard Xichen and didn’t stop. I appreciate the effort, but we know our reality.”

Even with his anger, even with the pain and despair of wanting Lan Wangji to be here, Wei Wuxian can be sure that this would torment Lan Wangji immensely. He loved his family and even if his sect was the one who hurt him, he knows he still trusted them to his very last moments. “Don’t do that.”

Lan Qiren is apparently beyond that because he doesn’t look affected by what he says nor takes a moment to consider it. “Wangji would like you to be happy. I’ll leave you to continue with what you were doing.”

Wei Wuxian immediately feels that he needs to do something, to say something before the man leaves, something tells him he won’t have the chance of talking to him anytime soon but is stopped by the appearance of a tall figure.

“Uncle,” Lan Xichen calls, stopping the man before he can walk any further. “I was hoping we could talk later... I— There are some things I would like to talk about.”

There’s pain in his voice, that spark of vulnerability that says he truly needs it, but to Wei Wuxian’s horror, Lan Qiren looks ready to say no, to apologise and excuse himself so he can return to the room he has been in for heavens know how long and that is what makes him speak.

“Lan Zhan wouldn’t be happy knowing you are in seclusion,” he says, mind spinning as it comes with the next words. “Was it your fault? Partially, yes, just like a part falls on me even when I have been told that I’m innocent, but he still trusted you enough to bring A-Yuan, he knew you would keep him safe... Don’t disrespect his memory.”

And that does something.

There’s pain and something akin to regret appearing on his face and Wei Wuxian knows he probably went too far, but he is convinced that is the case. Lan Zhan was hurt because his father was in seclusion for a long time and seeing his uncle in the same condition would hurt him as much.

“Wangji was disappointed with what we did,” he replies. “We failed him and that is the only reality.”

“Wangji apologised for causing problems and for leaving me right before he died in my arms,” Lan Xichen interrupts him. “It is true that we failed him, but to say he was disappointed is a lie... he was better, so much better than that.”

Lan Qiren looks at him with an expression that says it’s actually the first time he is hearing what Lan Zhan said before dying. “That’s not...”

“Lan Zhan is gone, but I don’t think he would want to see his family leaving as well,” Wei Wuxian says.

“Wangji is resting now,” he says, shaking his head as he takes a shaky step back. “To even think he’s being held back by what’s going on is cruel.”

“You and I know how stubborn he was, uncle,” Lan Xichen whispers, emotions tight in his chest. “I want to think he is no longer suffering, but to abandon us... he wasn’t like that.”

“Xichen—”

“Let’s talk, please,” the leader cuts him off before he can continue. “I was unfair towards you, so please, let’s talk, do what we should have done years ago.”

“I will think about it.”

Wei Wuxian has the feeling that this is the biggest change the leader has seen in his uncle in a long, long time.

“I apologise it took me so long to meet you, Young Master Wei,” Lan Xichen whispers as he sits down slowly. “I’m afraid I wasn’t in the best state of mind.”

“It’s understandable,” he says with a tired sigh. “I wasn’t either and I guess it’s the most normal thing, things weren’t doing great, but now they are... horrible.”

“They are and I’m sorry you’re being dragged to the centre of it once more,” he says, keeping his hand pressed against his forehead. “I just... I missed this and now I have to solve it.”

“I’m used to being in the centre of all the problems, it’s how it normally goes for me,” he chuckles even if there is not a single gram of humour inside his body. “I have no intentions of backing up. What the Jin did to Wen Ning and, well, everyone, is not something I can forgive and just let go.”

“Knowing A-Yao— Jin Guangyao, he knows he made a mistake back at Carp Tower and there’s a small chance he doesn’t react as he would normally do,” Lan Xichen continues. “Even when we grew apart over the years, I know he needs to have complete control over a situation to keep his composed and controlled nature.”

“Do you think he will try to lure us into a trap?”

“I don’t know, but I believe he has no intention of being in Carp Tower for our reunion,” he says tiredly.

“Qin Su looked fine when we were there,” Wei Wuxian points out, even when he remembers the woman was actively avoiding him. “Well, from what I could see.”

“She looked perfectly fine but I don’t know if he would lie about it... he seems to really appreciate her.”

Wei Wuxian got that impression as well, unlike Jin Guangshan who had no respect for his wife given his multiple affairs, Jin Guangyao seemed to value her and looked genuinely affectionate. Then again he could be lying. “Do you know why she avoided me? Well, Mo Xuanyu?”

Lan Xichen looks, for the lack of better words, embarrassed by that question and from there he can tell it isn’t a minor incident. “I don’t know the details, but I heard Mo Xuanyu tended to stalk her, it was said he wanted something with her despite being married.”

“For the love of...”

“I’m afraid I can’t assure that was the case now, however,” Lan Xichen adds with a small sigh. “I never talked to the young man nor saw him.”

Wei Wuxian finds himself sighting at that. He hasn’t really heard much about Mo Xuanyu in all the time he has been here and wishes he could find a reliable source that doesn’t go with what the rest says. The man who offered his body was desperate, broken beyond repair and it doesn’t really match the lunatic everyone says he was.

“What are we going to do, then?” he asks, knowing there isn’t much he can do. “If he’s not in Lanling, what is going to happen?”

“I... I’m not sure,” the leader admits, once more looking ashamed of what he’s saying. “I’m sure he won’t be there, but at the same time, I don’t know where he is going or what he will do now that he feels cornered.”

The leader looks so conflicted it hurts Wei Wuxian to not have something that helps him, but if the leader, who is his sworn brother, doesn't know what Jin Guangyao could do, then he has no hope at all. "We can't rush things, it would be dangerous, even when we discovered things we're at a clear disadvantage."

It's clear Lan Xichen understands, but still looks as lost as Wei Wuxian is feeling and the time drags until the idea pops inside his head. "I heard he built watchtowers, what if he hides in one of them?"

Lan Xichen frowns before abruptly looking up at him. "I don't think so, it has no strategic point, but there's a temple at Yunping, he put a lot of effort into building it after the brothel that existed there was burnt."

That immediately lights up a memory inside Wei Wuxian's head.

"I know where we need to go."

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Reaching the Guanyin Temple proves to be the right choice.

Before even getting too close Wei Wuxian can sense there's something inside that doesn't really fall under what's normal for such a temple and when he and Lan Xichen go inside he can confirm it. That, by now familiar sensation that takes over him at sensing Nie Mingjue's resentful energy has him, is hiding inside, mixing with the rest of the things floating around.

"Your guess was right, Zewu-jun," he mutters, glancing around the place to look at the normal people walking and the monks subtly glancing at them. "It's still surprising that he took him here."

"We can't do something with so many people around," Lan Xichen says after taking a moment to come to terms with the information. "We will have to wait."

And they do wait until the temple closes and most of the villagers are safe in their houses, but it doesn't really make things any easier. Jin Ling is suddenly there, being guided towards the temple by that menace called a dog who probably felt the resentful energy as well and decided to guide her master there.

Wei Wuxian's mind goes into a frenzy as he sees the son of his martial sister running headfirst into danger and despite having a voice in the back of his head telling him to be careful, he ends up rushing to intervene, managing to avoid the dog and push Jin Ling out of an arrow's way. That alone puts them at a clear disadvantage, but he tries to find comfort in the fact that the dog proved to be useful and ran away to hopefully look for help.

"I need to give you credit for coming here," Jin Guangyao says as he looks at Lan Xichen's sword. "Was I too obvious, Er-ge?"

The hold Lan Xichen has on his sword tightens. "Why are you doing this?"

Jin Guangyao lets out a faint sigh as if he's the one being bothered by all of this. "I believe we're beyond explanations. I do not wish to have a confrontation with you three."

"So we should just let it go?" Wei Wuxian demands, still keeping a protective arm in front of Jin Ling who has seen better days. "Allow you to do whatever you want?"

"Ironically you bring that up given who you really are," he replies, apparently unaffected by what he said. "Wei Wuxian, the Yiling Patriarch, is responsible for the death of many cultivators. Didn't know you are such a shameless person."

"He has nothing to do with the current situation," Lan Xichen says before he can answer back. "Do not try to change the subject."

"And what is the subject?" Jin Guangyao asks, cold eyes fixing on his sworn brother. "Me being guilty of everything?"

"You kept Wen Ning locked up, you disrespected Mingjue's body, his memory and you are keeping him from resting," Lan Xichen says, voice filled with anger and... pain. "You claim you didn't know about Wen Ning's existence, but how couldn't you? You are the leader of the Lanling Jin Sect, you knew what your father did and wanted to do prior to his death."

"You think I knew everything he did or planned?" Jin Guangyao asks, raising a brow. "You are giving him too much credit."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Jin Guangyao doesn't reply right away, however, his calculating eyes are looking between the three of them before moving to the monks and a few cultivators that are around to aid him. Wei Wuxian knows that despite the numbers, the man doesn't have the advantage. Lan Xichen alone is one of the strongest cultivators and it would take more than this to bring him down and Wei Wuxian's addition is a clear threat, more so if Jin Guangyao considers they are already aware of the tally they forged and the rest of the situation.

"I see we no longer are willing to solve this in a reasonable way," he says after a moment of silence, eyes moving to the door before returning to them. "Are you sure you can assure A-Ling's safety?"

Those words work like a trigger for everyone to move. Lan Xichen is suddenly fighting against the small group of cultivators and Wei Wuxian, along with Jin Ling, are defending themselves from the monks. The former Yiling Patriarch, however, fails to notice the new presence before it is too late.

Both Wei Wuxian and Lan Xichen freeze when Su Minshan manages to get a hold of Jin Ling and presses the edge of his sword against his neck. The state the junior was left in making him incapable of properly fighting back.

"He is your own nephew," Lan Xichen hisses, glaring at his sworn brother. "He's just an innocent kid!"

“I have no intentions of hurting him, but I’m afraid you two aren’t being reasonable,” Jin Guanyao replies with relative ease. “I need you two to behave.”

It is humiliating and Wei Wuxian reels with pure anger as he looks at the pain and fear in the junior’s eyes while the one holding him seems to enjoy what he is doing. “You are vile.”

“Big words for someone who caused Lan Wangji’s death.”

Wei Wuxian can hear Lan Xichen’s cry of anger and a series of words filled with the same anger, but he is incapable of understanding them because he knows Jin Guanyao is right. No matter what Lan Xichen or anyone says, he knows Lan Zhan is dead because he appeared in his life.

If he never messed with him, if he had never indirectly forced him to choose between him and his own family he wouldn’t be dead, he would be alive, helping the world like he always wanted to. No one will ever be capable of taking away the piece of fault that directly falls on him.

Wei Wuxian feels numb as he sees Lan Xichen putting his Shouye back on its sheath so Jin Guanyao can seal his spiritual energy and take Liebing away. When a monk yanks the flute out of his hands, he barely manages to hold back a whimper because it feels as if someone has pulled his nail out, as if they have taken the only thing that still connected him to Lan Zhan.

“Let’s go inside, it’s going to rain.”

Despite his numbness, Wei Wuxian is grateful when Su She finally lets go of Jin Ling after sealing his spiritual energy and shoves him to the floor while ordering him to not cause any more problems. The poor junior is still too hurt to snap at him as he would normally do and it breaks Wei Wuxian’s heart, but he’s at least out of danger.

Inside, they can see Jin Guanyao appearing to be doing something behind the large statue placed in the middle of the temple, with the monks doing most of the work. Lan Xichen moves to check on the junior and only stands up again when he is sure he is not hurt, Wei Wuxian is thankful for this because he is sure Jin Ling still wants nothing to do with him.

“I apologise, Lianfang-zun, the dog escaped,” one of the monks says, sending a nasty glare in Jin Ling’s direction. “It proved to be too fast.”

“As expected from a spiritual dog, I’m afraid,” Jin Guanyao dismisses it, still focusing on whatever they are working on behind the statue. “It won’t be a problem, I don’t plan to stay here.”

“So you really are escaping,” Lan Xichen, who by now looks beyond wanting to be the controlled person he normally is, says. “The least you can do is let Minjue rest.”

“I never wanted things to end like this, Er-ge, I didn’t—”

“Stop pretending to be innocent, you worked with your father, you wanted him to recognise you and you continued no matter what,” Lan Xichen cuts him off. “And... don’t call me that.”

Jin Guangyao looks, for a moment, genuinely hurt by what the man just said and it makes sense, as far as he knew, Lan Xichen was always respectful towards him, so to hear him throwing him in the same bag his father fell was surely painful.

“If you think that man was capable of recognising someone like me, then I’m disappointed,” he says, voice now colder and distant. “He never did, I was always going to be the son of a prostitute, no matter what I did.”

“So you took it out on everyone?” Wei Wuxian manages to ask despite the numbing sensation all over his body. “Killed Chifeng-zun, hurt your own nephew and decided to fool the cultivation world just like your father.”

“I merely understood that it is me who had to work for my future,” he says. “Life continues moving around us no matter what happens, right, Sect Leader Lan?”

“You and I have nothing in common,” Lan Xichen sentences. “Nothing at all.”

“Are you sure?” he asks, tilting his head to the side. “After Hanguang-jun died you changed many things.”

“Don’t bring Wangji into this.”

“I’m merely pointing out the similarities,” he shrugs. “When Da-ge died, I realised he was never going to take me seriously, no matter what I did, so I had to make a choice.”

Jin Guangshan wasn’t a good person and his death doesn’t really sadden him or anything, but he can’t get behind Jin Guangyao’s reasoning because the man not only limited himself to getting his revenge, he had to kill people who had nothing to do with it and that will never be alright.

Lan Xichen is clearly distressed by what he’s hearing but still tries to keep himself together as he continues questioning Jin Guangyao in hopes of putting things together and finding the real human behind that amicable facade. In the end, the only thing they get is that Jin Guangyao did everything to prove to the world he was more than what they said he was and that realising Jin Guangshan was never going to give him credit for anything is what pushed him to do even harsher things.

Su She defends him from any kind of implication either of them makes, set on idolising his *Lianfang-zun* because, in his eyes, he’s the only cultivator who isn’t vain and who deserves good things because he worked hard for them. Wei Wuxian can at least point out a thousand things he’s wrong about, but it stops mattering when his eyes fall on a portion of skin that is showing after the man had his robes burnt by a trap placed in what looked like a coffin that came from behind the statue and he jumped in to protect Jin Guangyao from getting even more injured.

“You... You have backlash marks,” he says, pointing at him and making the rest of the people there look at him. “The curse Jin Zixun had!”

The man tries to cover his chest with no success, eyes glaring at Wei Wuxian who feels close to having his mind collapsing. “Do not speak nonsense!”

It doesn't matter if he tries to deny it because Wei Wuxian knows it's exactly how it looks and the way his mind spirals down reminds him a lot of how he felt back at Nightless City. He already knew he didn't curse Jin Zixun, but if that curse never appeared Jin Zixun wouldn't have attacked him back at the Qionggqi path, Jin Zixuan would be alive and Jiang Yanli would be as well.

He can't even react when Jiang Cheng appears after breaking the door.

His former martial brother is angry beyond words when he takes in Jin Ling's clearly distressed form and the overall situation and wastes no time in attacking the monks, Su She and Jin Guangyao, but if the man has something to defend himself, those are his words he injects with most poisonous venom and once it becomes evident he is at a clear disadvantage, he retorts to them.

“Sect Leader Jiang, isn't it hypocritical to judge me for not giving an answer when you can't answer your own doubts?”

Jiang Cheng grits his teeth, Zidian sparkling furiously in his hands. “Shut up.”

“Torn between missing him and wanting to kill him if he comes back,” he says, Wei Wuxian knows it is about him. “You have allowed him to roam freely all this time.”

“I don't give a damn about what you have to say,” Jiang Cheng says, but it's clear the words are indeed affecting him. “This isn't about him or me, this is about the shit you're doing.”

“Are you worried about A-Ling's safety as well? I said it, I don't want to hurt him,” he replies with the same calmness. “I understand your concerns, of course, I know how it is to be worried for a family member.”

The way he uses his words to hurt in the same way one would use a sword makes Wei Wuxian's skin crawl and hate the man even more. A part of him wants to do something, speak up against the bunch of nonsense he's saying, but he's well aware that he can't. For starters, Jiang Cheng has made it clear that he wants nothing to do with him, so having him speak up will probably be taken as a huge offence and most importantly, he can't even find the right words. His world is still spinning after discovering the real culprit preferred to remain silent while he was blamed and even denies it despite having clear proof in his own body.

“You're just a coward with delusions of grandeur,” Jiang Cheng spits. “The son of a whore.”

That proves to be the worst thing to say because Wei Wuxian can see the anger and fury that fills the man's eyes for a moment before he forces it back down and seems to ready himself to attack back.

It is as effective and cruel as they expected it.

Jin Guangyao doesn't hesitate in bringing up the death of Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan as a way to remind him they died because he was incapable of helping them, talks about Jiang Yanli's death while he was also there and brings out the fact that he *blatantly* abandoned who he saw as his brother because he proved to be a huge inconvenience and ultimately says he couldn't even kill Wei Wuxian back at Nightless City and couldn't do it now in the present.

Jiang Cheng valiantly tries to ignore his words, but Wei Wuxian knows the emotional side of life is not his strongest area and thus, ends up crumbling down in his own despair and hatred and that is the opening Jin Guanyao needs to stab him in the chest. Wei Wuxian sees his two lives flashing in front of his eyes.

"Jiang Cheng!" he cries, hurrying towards him without thinking twice and holding his arm to keep him from falling.

To his surprise, his former martial brother doesn't push him away, doesn't even snap at him. His physical and mental pain is greater than any other emotion he could be experiencing.

"Jiujiu!" Jin Ling is also at his side for a moment and even Lan Xichen, both looking worriedly at the leader.

"Stop this," Lan Xichen hisses, looking up at the other who stays in his same place. "What do you want? Haven't you done enough?"

"I believe you are who complicated it this much," he replies, looking down at Jiang Cheng who is now focusing on not bleeding out. "And I suggest you don't complicate it further."

This time, Jiang Cheng has the strength to glare at him and after a second, he's also yanking his arms free of Jin Ling's and Wei Wuxian's hold. "Fuck you!"

Jin Guangyao doesn't seem to mind, however, now more interested in the situation with the coffin than them now that they are no longer a threat. It's clear the trap wasn't something he was expecting, he doubts he would order those monks to work to bring the coffin out only to have them die, but he can't think of what else he could be looking for.

"Minshan, please treat your wounds," he says eventually and when the man limps his way towards him. "Thank you for your help."

"Backlash marks won't go away," Wei Wuxian hisses, making Jiang Cheng lift his face and look at him and then at Su She with confused eyes. "You can lie all you want, but you know it's there and it's just a pathetic effort."

"You are all the same, vain, conceited and arrogant," he spits. "You will get your punishment, of course, just like Lan Wangji."

"Do not even speak his name," he says immediately. "Lan Zhan should be alive and you two should be dead, you will never be half of what he was."

It angers Su She more than it angers Jin Guangyao and that probably is the only reason why the man doesn't jump to strangle the life out of him. "How dare you?!"

"What you believe makes no difference," Jin Guangyao says. "Hanguang-jun's death was the consequence of mistakes done by others, you're merely projecting the regret and guilt you didn't face when it happened."

"Stop talking about him," Lan Xichen says, voice trembling with both pain and anger. "He has nothing to do with this and I won't tolerate anyone disrespecting his name."

Su She looks ready to say something stupid again, but Jin Guangyao stops him by raising his injured hand in front of him. "I understand it is a difficult topic, Sect Leader, but carrying the guilt alone isn't a healthy practice, not when you just wanted the best for him."

It is more than obvious that he is trying to play with a topic that is extremely delicate for Lan Xichen, trying to twist it so the man changes his mind about Wei Wuxian's involvement in his brother's death and Wei Wuxian worries he will succeed. The emotional toll this is taking on the leader is becoming more noticeable, with him feeling guilty about not noticing this and then the mention of his brother at any given chance is little by little pushing him to the edge.

The former Yiling Patriarch wishes he could do something to avoid it, to shut the two of them like he wanted to do when they attacked Jiang Cheng, but it is now clear that anything he says is twisted and used against him to push further against what happened to Lan Wangji. What's worse is the fact that he is still ignoring what Su She did.

"Everything that happened solved your life, right?" he asks, voice a bit breathless. "I was all just, so convenient for you."

Jiang Cheng's and Jin Ling's eyes are fixed on him, but he can't even feel like stopping for their sake. "You used my confrontation with Jin Zixun to continue with your plans and..."

The scenes from the past come to an abrupt stop when one little detail takes over the rest of things but that is enough to have his heart missing several beats and a huge pressure falling right on top of him.

"The second flute," he whispers, seeing Su She and Jin Guangyao narrow their eyes at him. "It existed and it was you..."

Lan Xichen, Jin Ling and Jiang Cheng look lost in what the fuck he is saying and he can't blame them. No one was there at the Qionggqi Path when *that* happened and things were pure chaos back at Nightless City, but Wei Wuxian remembers that flute and feels like an idiot for not remembering sooner.

"What are you—"

"You weren't happy with just conveniently using the hatred they all had for me, you had to make sure I played the role you needed to make your twisted plan work!"

That is enough to make the others understand what he means and even Jin Guangyao and Su She seems to understand they can't just shrug it off. Jin Guangyao in particular lets out a tired sigh as he looks to the side.

"It was never in my plan to have Jin Zixuan dying at that moment... but it was indeed, convenient."

That's all Wei Wuxian needs to feel that last piece of glass holding everything together snapping under the sheer force of the situation. He already knew protecting the Wen remnants for as long as he could was the right thing, already knew he never cursed Jin Zixun nor moved around purposely hurting people just because he felt like it, but what happened at the Qiongqi Path and then at Nightless City had this veil of uncertainty that made him feel guilty.

He hated Jin Zixuan because he was sure the man planned with his cousin the attack and was trying to play dumb, he hated Jin Zixun for breaking the gift he worked so hard on for Jin Ling and for everything he was saying, his levels of anger were irrationally high and it made sense this loss of control would end up with Wen Ning using the anger to kill both, at that time the second flute was just his mind trying to justify his mistake. What happened at Nightless City was similar, he was so desperate to stop the puppets so his shijie was safe that he ended up convincing himself that he really lost his mind and the little control he had over them and that's why she ended up injured and died shortly after.

To realise that was never the case makes him feel like he will lose his mind.

What did he do to deserve the anger, disdain and collective hatred of the whole cultivation world? At what moment did they all decide a young adult had to become their escape from the consequences of their actions? He was a normal cultivator at that time, with daring and challenging ideas, but not someone who was inherently bad and it didn't matter to them, they destroyed everything they could and that led to the death of innocent people and eventually his own.

Among his mind-consuming pain and anger, he can hear Lan Xichen's distressed voice demanding an answer and Wei Wuxian can understand him. If all of that didn't happen then Lan Zhan would be alive as well, he wouldn't have needed to defend the memory of someone who was already dead, wouldn't have been punished, and the two Jades would still be two, Lan Qiren wouldn't be in seclusion wasting away, A-Yuan would have a father and overall, he would be alive.

Jin Guangyao, however, doesn't really give an answer. The patience he seemed to have until that moment seems to be slipping out of his fingers now that so many things have been exposed and he no longer needs to hide behind that amicable facade of someone who only does something when he *needs* to or only when that's the only option he has.

Wei Wuxian hates him, hates him with the same intensity he hated Wen Chao, Wen Zhuliu and Wang Lingjiao.

"I hope that you by now understand you are the ones complicating things further, so please refrain from doing it."

Wei Wuxian doesn't want to just let him go, refuses to let him go on with life when he indirectly ended the lives of many innocent ones... but at the same time, what can he do? He managed to get this far, to uncover the man's plan before he could get away, but what to do now? Jin Guangyao has the upper hand, even with the help of Lan Xichen and Jiang Cheng the man still has them at his mercy and doing something wrong can end with Jin Ling injured or worse.

"You will pay for this."

They don't seem to take him seriously, with Su She sending him a fierce glare he ignores for the sake of keeping his eyes on Jin Guangyao, but in the end, the world finally shows that it doesn't hate him as much as he believed, though, the way it shows it is questionable.

Lan Sizhui being thrown inside isn't what they were expecting and Lan Xichen panics as he hurries towards him, checking him for injuries while he uses his body to shield him from further damage. Wen Ning appearing wielding Baxia is the second surprise.

"He's tainted by that energy," the junior says while the sentient puppet seems to analyse each one of them with those white eyes. "We were near Yunmeng but I saw him and had to follow him."

"That was too risky, A-Yuan," Lan Xichen whispers, helping him up. "Mingjue's energy is completely irrational, out of control and you could have—"

"I'm alright, uncle, I'm sorry."

Wei Wuxian can see the wide array of negative emotions inside the leader's eyes as the fear of losing his nephew is added to the existing ones and can see in Lan Sizhui's eyes the worry and regret making his uncle suffer with this even if he didn't actively try to do it.

That's what Wei Wuxian needs to know what to do.

Jin Guangyao is already frightened by the appearance of Nie Mingjue's resentful energy, so hearing Wei Wuxian's eerie whistling seems to aggravate it. Su She tries to stop him upon noticing this, but Lan Xichen intervenes in time to block the attack with the aid of his newly freed spiritual energy.

The former Yiling Patriarch can sense the fear consuming the Jin leader and uses it to try his best to direct Baxia's anger towards him, but soon realises it isn't an easy task. Nie Mingjue's resentful energy controlling Wen Ning is behaving erratically due to the amount of anger and hatred and doesn't seem to be capable of differentiating Jin Guangyao from Jin Ling due to their similar clothes and the bond that unites them due to their blood. The only good thing is that Jiang Cheng is protecting Jin Ling, but even that is quick to dissolve because Jiang Cheng doesn't have the strength to protect his nephew without dying and Wei Wuxian refuses to let him die right in front of him.

"Wei Wuxian, take it!"

Jiang Cheng's sudden yell has him looking away from Jin Guangyao to find the man throwing his flute, his Chenqing, in his direction. Having it back in his hands sends a shiver down his spine but wastes no time in using it to direct Wen Ning, who by now is struggling to block Baxia with his other hand so it doesn't hurt the other two, towards a still frightened Jin Guangyao.

Su She forgets about Lan Xichen when he sees the man he admires in imminent danger and doesn't even hesitate in trying his best to protect him, but he isn't a specially strong cultivator and the years Wei Wuxian has been gone haven't really made him stronger, so what happens with the second hit is predictable.

Wei Wuxian realises he can't even feel bad about him when he falls a couple of steps away from him, dead.

Lan Xichen takes the moment where Jin Guangyao appears to mourn the death of the other and Wen Ning tries to once more keep himself from going back to Jin Ling, to get his nephew and Jin Ling out of the temple so they stay safe. He tries to convince Jiang Cheng of leaving as well, but he's angry and looks set on reaching the end of this.

Without the fear of having the two juniors getting hurt, Wei Wuxian feels his anger and hatred spike as he once more pushes Wen Ning to go for Jin Guangyao who has taken his zither out and is trying to stop his imminent death, but he doesn't care, he wants the man to pay, to end his life for everything he has done and avenge everyone who died because of him, but then—

Then he realises what he is about to do to Wen Ning for the second time.

What happened at the Qionggqi Path left the man feeling guilty, left him feeling like the monster the cultivation world said he was and even when Wei Wuxian now knows it wasn't him who ordered to kill Jin Zixun and Jin Zixuan, Wen Ning was still used to kill someone and he... doesn't deserve it.

"We need to seal the resentful energy," he says, surprising Lan Xichen who has been standing there with a conflicted expression. "Separate it from Wen Ning."

With the explanation, he ends up understanding and it isn't long before he joins him to play one of his melodies composed to appease evil beings and fierce corpses. Wen Ning reacts as negatively as they expected, with his consciousness clashing against the hatred that wants to control him to enact his revenge until it becomes unbearable and Wen Ning is thrown to the other side of the room.

Once free, Wei Wuxian guides the possessed sword to the coffin and once more struggles to seal it there, not wanting the energy of that poor man to be used to hurt innocent people once more. He's dizzy and exhausted by the time he stops playing and even needs to lean on the wall for a couple of seconds before moving back to where the others are.

"Do not resist," Lan Xichen says to Jin Guangyao who hasn't moved at having Jiang Cheng's sword pointed at him. "It is over, please."

It is more like a plea that speaks volumes of how he is currently doing and it just adds to the fury Wei Wuxian feels for the Jin leader, for a second regretting getting rid of the spirit before he ended his miserable life.

“You simply don’t understand,” Jin Guangyao doesn’t offer any other explanation, he’s beyond that now that the advantage he had over them has evaporated. He now looks desperate and angry, with his face showing everything he hid inside of him all these years so the world continues believing his words and doesn’t get to see the monster that hid behind. “Never will.”

In the blink of an eye he’s launching himself for Wei Wuxian and the man guesses it makes sense. Because of him all of this was uncovered, because of him the only people who were loyal towards him are dead and because of him, he is losing everything he worked so hard for. Even when he never asked to come back, he is here.

Lan Xichen intervening right before he can reach him by stabbing him is something he wasn’t expecting.

“You...” Jin Guangyao whispers hoarsely, eyes staring at the man who looks to be experiencing the same amount of pain. “You did it.”

“I promised myself I wasn’t going to fail someone else,” Lan Xichen whispers, voice trembling. “I never wanted this to happen.”

Despite his words, Wei Wuxian can hear the pain in his voice and can see the painful emotions mixing violently in his eyes. Even with everything that is happening, it is clear Lan Xichen still saw in Jin Guangyao something good, maybe even considered him a friend, so to do this, to be the one inflicting a deathly wound hurts.

Wei Wuxian knows how that feels.

“I always saw you as someone different,” the now-dying leader whispers. “It is a shame, a real shame.”

“You are who ruined it,” Wei Wuxian says when he sees Lan Xichen’s hand tremble. “You had a genuine friend who cared for you. You could have done so many things differently but decided to throw it away, was it worth it?”

Even in his last moments, Jin Guangyao manages to show how much he hates him and how little he regrets following the path he chose. He reminds him of Su She and maybe that’s what made them work so well. Wei Wuxian has many things he would like to say, many words filled with venom that had been fermenting for a while now, but realises there’s no use.

As soon as Jin Guangyao lets out his last breath, the final mark on his arm is gone.

Despite his death, things show no signs of slowing down.

When they leave the temple they find out that cultivators from Yunmeng and other sects are arriving. Lan Jingyi and Ouyang Zizhen are among them and waste no time in going to check on Lan Sizhui who is in the middle of helping Wen Ning, who is still dealing with the aftermath of what happened and the unhealthy amount of energy it took from him, and worrying about his uncle.

Wei Wuxian notes, however, that he looks happy to have him next to Lan Xichen.

Jin Ling is standing in front of Jiang Cheng, crying like the child he still is while Jiang Cheng is staring at him with an expression that hurts to look at. It obviously hurts him to see his nephew suffering and it hurts him, even more, to be incapable of doing something, but in the end, he reaches for his arm to tug him out of that place, throwing one last glance at Wei Wuxian.

It feels as if he's staring at his very soul.

"How could I miss all of this?" Lan Xichen asks, though, he can't be sure he is asking him since he's staring numbly at the floor while leaning on a pillar. "I was supposed to make things better but I... Look at all he did."

"This isn't your fault, Zewu-jun... he was never an honest person," he sighs, taking a step forward so the other hear him well. "His interests changed."

"I thought he was a good person. He was smart, capable and kind all the time he was with Mingjue and even during the Sunshot Campaign... he helped us so much," he continues, as if he isn't really listening to him. "How could I be so blind?"

"You're blaming yourself for things that you couldn't even control," he argues once more. "How were you supposed to get rid of their nonsensical practices if you aren't the Lanling Jin leader?"

"Because I promised Wangji I was going to do the right thing," he says, his eyes snapping up to look at him. "I told him not to worry because I was going to make the cultivation world a better place without so many injustices. It is clear I did nothing."

"You did nothing?" Wei Wuxian asks with a frown that seems to surprise the other. "So you will throw everything away?"

"I didn't—"

"You raised A-Yuan to be the type of boy Lan Zhan would have loved to see, you kept him from suffering even more," he starts, not even caring he interrupted him. "You changed things inside your sect, you changed the freaking Gusu Lan Sect so kids could be kids, forced the elders and everyone to live up to the claims of righteousness, you made sure Lan Zhan's name wasn't disrespected and..."

He doesn't know how to add the next part, a lump forms inside his throat as he looks back at Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi who are helping Wen Ning while the rest of the cultivators throw

alarmed looks at him and even look ready to take their swords out despite his obvious weakness.

“You taught them we weren’t the demons everyone said we were.”

Lan Xichen looks towards them and amidst the pain, Wei Wuxian can see the smallest smile curving his lips up. “I couldn’t let the lies live on.”

“If you think that is *nothing*, then I don’t know what to tell you,” Wei Wuxian says with a sigh. “Not everything needs to be written in the history books so it is worth it.”

“I can understand that but at the same time... I just don’t know what to do,” the leader admits, voice cracking at the end of the sentence. “This shouldn’t have happened.”

“You’re right, it shouldn’t, but there are times when it doesn’t matter what, stuff still happens, we should know by now,” he continues. “They ruined a lot of people’s lives, we can’t let them ruin yet another one.”

He can tell the man understands the severity of his words and can understand he’s talking about both of them, but for now, the pain is bigger, so Wei Wuxian shields him from whoever looks their way so he can let out his pain and frustration because even in this situation, people are there ready to judge.

Wei Wuxian has never been good with comforting people, but Lan Zhan taught him, now he realises, that just having someone there can do wonders.

“We still have many things to do... right?”

“Yes, we do.”

He, of course, isn’t surprised by how fast he is to reply.

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Jin Guangyao’s death still throws the Cultivation World into complete disarray.

All the secrets that had been hidden were revealed to the public and while most felt deceived and betrayed by the facts they were now facing, others went a step beyond with lies and made up stories that painted the deceased man as a monster that deserved to suffer for eternity. It didn’t matter, of course, Jin Guangyao was destined to suffer after being locked in the same coffin Nie Mingjue and Baxia were locked in after considering his corpse could have the same level of resentment his former sworn brother had.

Wei Wuxian can’t really feel bad for him, not even when Jin Guangyao vaguely reminds him of himself with all the lies and stories that never happened but were created to paint him as a demon.

Shortly after Jin Guangyao was sealed, the attention shifted to who had been his wife.

People wanted to know Qin Su's involvement in everything her husband did, with some claiming she was aware and even an active participant in everything while others argued she was just a victim. The problem, however, was that the poor health Jin Guangyao mentioned she had before he decided to escape appeared to be true because the woman remained silent, with a vacant expression that didn't change no matter what.

Her taking her own life shortly after didn't surprise anyone, but it still hurt the ones who were already genuinely hurt.

Jin Ling was understandably heartbroken by what happened at the Guanyin temple with the death of his uncle and then the death of his aunt who, like him, was surely just a victim, but as if the world didn't have enough, it became evident that he was not going to be allowed to experience it or even find a way to deal with it as he needed to take the position his uncle left. Wei Wuxian wanted to help, assure he would be safe, but he wasn't brave enough to actually approach him. Things between them were far from being resolved and he had no way of knowing if the junior no longer blamed him for what happened to his parents or if nothing changed. To his luck, Jiang Cheng arrived at Carp Tower with Zidian shortly after and left clear that his nephew was the only one who could take the leader position.

Wei Wuxian decides to give them space.

Things back in Gusu weren't any easier anyway. Lan Xichen, despite knowing he had done right back at the temple, was hurt by what happened to his two sworn brothers and how everything ended. Killing someone he saw as a friend at one point wasn't easy and he still struggled to come to terms with it. Wei Wuxian tried to convince him that Nie Mingjue's death wasn't his fault and that Jin Guangyao's ultimate demise was brought by his own decisions, but as long as he felt guilty there was little he could do.

He needed time.

"Your brother and I came to an agreement," he starts, caressing the cold stone with the tip of his fingers. "Jin Guangyao messed everything up and there are various things that need to be solved, so we will take care of it. As much as we can anyway..."

Talking to Lan Zhan was never hard when they were younger, not really. It was true he got ignored most of the time and true that he wasn't the most talkative person, but Wei Wuxian never felt the scary aura others said he possessed and that kept everyone away from him. Now it is different, so much different, and he wishes he could go back to those teen years.

"My time to travel around finally came," he adds with a faint chuckle. "Some still hate me but I'm not the main target anymore and even have allies. Nie Huaisang looks a bit different now that Jin Guangyao is gone and I can't help but wonder if that has to do something with what happened... Whatever, I should take advantage of my freedom. Can I be honest and admit it will be lonely?"

The lump inside his throat seems to get bigger as he swallows and clears his throat in hopes of pushing the emotions back down.

“I wish you could go with me or, just, wish you were here,” he whispers, pressing his thumb against the name. “Wish we could talk and be honest about what we felt. We messed around with each other so much, what’s with you being all cryptic?”

He tries to imagine his beautiful eyes and annoyed expression, trying to imagine he is sitting in front of the man instead of his tomb because it makes it somehow easier to deal with it.

“This reminds me a lot of both, you know?” he mutters as he looks down at the flutes he placed in front of them. “Black and white. It’s stupid, but I like how it feels to carry them with me.”

Even when he is sure he would never want to disturb Lan Zhan’s rest, he likes to feel that he still somehow has a connection with Lan Zhan by having with him what was the tassel in his jade token and that was always with him.

“Whatever, I’ll get the hang of it,” he says, forcing himself to smile like he used to do and reaching to get both instruments “Just know that I really appreciated and... loved you, Lan Zhan. I didn’t understand it sooner and was a complete idiot for missing everything you did for me and an even bigger idiot for pushing you away from me when I really wanted you to be close but, I did and I just—”

“Oh, Young Master Wei, I’m sorry, I was just— I’ll leave and come back later.”

Despite almost having a heart attack with the appearance, Wei Wuxian hurries to stop Lan Sizhui from leaving by grabbing his wrist. “Hey, you don’t have to go, we’re done so... yeah, you stay.”

Lan Sizhui doesn’t look like the composed and calm junior he normally is and while Wei Wuxian knows it partially has to do with the state his uncle is in, he can immediately tell there’s something else because he isn’t looking directly at him and even back at Yunping he did.

When the kid fails to reply, he decides to give him space because as much as he was capable of helping the young A-Yuan whenever he burst out in tears, he is well aware that things are very different and the least he wants is to make him feel even more uncomfortable. It hurts, of course it does, but it’s better this way, he deserves a more peaceful life.

“Senior Wei I... wanted to talk to you,” Lan Sizhui says before he can move any further. “I was going to talk about it first with Father but I, well, maybe finding you here is his way of telling me what to do.”

It hurts to know this is the only way he has to *communicate* with who saved him and hurts him even more that no real replies come, but, at the same time, it warms his heart to know the young boy feels that strong connection to Lan Zhan.

“I’m all ears,” he says, turning around despite feeling the need to let his emotions run free. “You can still talk to me, that won’t be changing at all.”

He nods, still worried, still looking as if he is not sure how to deal with what he's experiencing and despite being worried, Wei Wuxian doesn't dare to open his mouth until the other is ready. When he does it, however, he freezes.

"I have been talking to Senior Wen and I remembered who I am," Lan Sizhui whispers, balling up his hands into tight fists. "I remember the Burial Mounds, the family I had there and... I remember you and him."

His eyes fill with tears as soon as he finishes talking, elegant and straight posture faltering as he looks up at him.

"Do you—"

"Xian-gege," he continues brokenly. "How could I forget him?"

Wei Wuxian doesn't even think twice.

With no hesitation he's quick to pull the kid into his arms and wrap his arms around his body, immediately feeling his sobs shaking his shoulders as his hands fist the front of his robes. "Don't blame yourself, A-Yuan, don't you dare to feel guilty about it."

The boy's answer is to cry harder and Wei Wuxian is incapable of holding back his emotions any longer. His own tears roll down his face and it makes the other hold onto him even tighter. Lan Yuan is now tall and has the complexion of a cultivator, but for a moment he feels as if he's that toddler again, that little kid with cute eyes and chubby cheeks that stole the hearts of so many people.

"He saved me," he says between sobs. "Granny Wen told me to stay hidden and I stayed there until he arrived, how could I forget?"

"Because you were sick, you were only four," he replies, holding his shoulders and pushing him a bit back so he can look at him. "You never did anything wrong, you didn't deserve to go through all that shit."

"But he's dead and I— I lost him just like I lost everyone else!" he says, little by little falling to his knees, forcing Wei Wuxian to move with him. "So many people suffered because of that and if it wasn't for me..."

"You are talking about Lan Zhan, the selfless idiot who didn't care about himself if that meant saving someone he cared for," he says, frowning as he forces the young one to keep his eyes on him. "He went there looking for me, looking for someone who jumped off a cliff right in front of him... Finding you was probably the only thing that gave him enough strength to come back to his own family, so don't disrespect that."

Lan Wangji dying shortly after returning to the Cloud Recesses leads him to believe that he left his home with the infection already burning away his life. Wei Wuxian is probably thinking too highly of himself, but he has the feeling the man would have died after not finding him if it wasn't for Sizhui.

“But I...”

“No, I won’t accept anything,” he cuts him before he can continue. “He brought you here so you were safe and I don’t doubt he hated knowing he was leaving you alone, but he still made sure you were in the best place he could offer.”

Lan Sizhui looks at the gravestone before once more dissolving in faint sobs but Wei Wuxian can at least find comfort in the fact that he is no longer debating his reasoning or denying it. He knows it will take him time to understand that it really isn’t his fault, but he’s hopeful.

“He gave me a family,” he whispers as he reaches to press his hand against the cold stone. “I have uncle, Jingyi, the other juniors and... now I have you.”

“You know how he was,” he jokes despite the lump in his throat. “That whole I’m cold nonsense could never hide how great and caring he was.”

“I can’t believe I was initially scared of him,” he comments with a chuckle mixed with a snuffle. “He’s the best father I could have asked for.”

“He was the perfect man, no doubt,” he says, smiling a bit more as the clear image of the other comes to his mind. “I mean it when I say he would be proud of you, A-Yuan. You’re the cultivator we both knew you were going to become one day.”

“I have always wanted to honour his memory, even when Uncle reminded me that being happy was the only thing he wanted me to be,” Lan Sizhui adds, resting his head on Wei Wuxian’s shoulder. “I will always do my best to make him proud... to make everyone proud.”

“You dumb child, we’re already proud,” he says, ignoring the pang that stabs his chest at the mention of a *we* that won’t happen. “I won’t let you go around blaming yourself. You are tall and all, but I will still plant you like a radish, just like before.”

He’s proud he manages to get a genuine laugh out of the young one and proud that he is capable of giving that sense of security despite being gone from his life for so long and despite not telling him the truth.

It will be alright, he tells himself.

He and Lan Xichen will work to make the world Lan Zhan would have loved to be in, he will be for Lan Sizhui so he never has to suffer the loss of a loved one ever again and there for Jin Ling even if the junior doesn’t reality want him near.

He’s sure he and Lan Zhan will see each other again one day.

Hey, how's it going?

I know I said I was updating the next week after uploading the previous part, but first I had some problems with my internet and after that, I opened the document and saw I wasn't really happy with a couple of things... So I deleted what I didn't like and added a whole lot more. Heh.

As you can see, I removed a lot of things because I considered it wouldn't make a lot of sense for WWX's condition. Yes, LXC was there, but it didn't feel right to just switch LWJ for his brother and so, went against it. We have no closure for the core issue, don't really have WWX and JL getting closer and we definitely didn't have the whole second siege. I didn't want to paint the story as if everything would have been better without LWJ because I don't think that was the case either.

So yeah, I hope you enjoyed this final chapter, I can say I suffered while writing WWX being completely devastated and remembering every two seconds that LWJ is gone but hey, I'm happy. Thank you so much for reading and thank you so much for the prompt, prompter.

End Notes

So yeah, wow, can't believe I wrote something where my precious LWJ dies, but at the same time, I'm enjoying writing such a tragic and painful setting so...yeah.

This has 5 more chapters to go and while it will focus on other characters and their reactions, it will also continue, in a sense, LXC's painful journey.

Thank you for reading, hope you can join me on this painful ride and can leave me a comment down there. Prompter, hope you enjoy!

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